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# *My Lost Self*

Arthur Williams Marchmont

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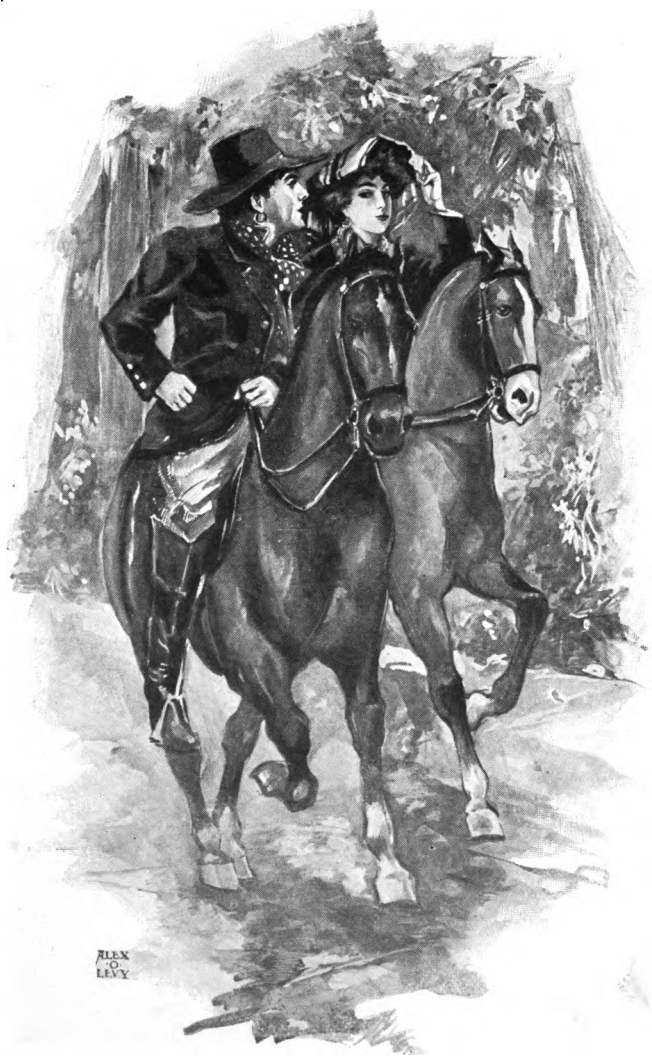


# **MY LOST SELF**









In this way we travelled for a mile or more.—Page 164

# My Lost Self

BY

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*Author of "When I was Czar," "By Right of Sword," etc.*

*Illustrated by ALEX O. LEVY*

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# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE AWAKENING	7
II. MASITA	15
III. BELTANO	25
IV. THE ISLAND	33
V. MOLTA	43
VI. MY CHANCE COMES	52
VII. GAOLER AND PRISONER	61
VIII. A HAZARDOUS ADVENTURE	69
IX. THE CARABINIERI	78
X. JEALOUSY	86
XI. "ARE YOU GAOLER OR SPY?"	94
XII. A GREEK SCHEME	102
XIII. "IF I COULD ONLY TRUST YOU!"	111
XIV. THE FIGHT	119
XV. BELTANO RETURNS	127
XVI. THE PRIEST	136
XVII. THE PLAN OF ESCAPE	145

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII. THE ESCAPE . . . . .	153
XIX. ON THE MAIN LAND . . . . .	161
XX. A DESPERATE PASS . . . . .	170
XXI. A FRESH DANGER . . . . .	178
XXII. MASITA TO THE RESCUE . . . . .	187
XXIII. BACK TO THE ISLAND . . . . .	195
XXIV. MOLTA'S WARNING . . . . .	202
XXV. A MURDER PLOT . . . . .	211
XXVI. THE CONFESSION . . . . .	220
XXVII. AN OVERWHELMING SURPRISE . . . . .	229
XXVIII. MOLTA'S TRIUMPH . . . . .	237
XIX. GREEK CUNNING . . . . .	245
XXX. SUSPENSE . . . . .	253
XXXI. A PARLEY . . . . .	262
XXXII. THE ATTACK . . . . .	270
XXXIII. BELTANO'S RUSE . . . . .	279
XXXIV. AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR . . . . .	288
XXXV. THE STORM . . . . .	296
XXXVI. THE END . . . . .	308

# MY LOST SELF

## CHAPTER I

### THE AWAKENING

My first conscious sensation was that of excruciating pain. It was as if a thousand hammers were being dashed against my head with rhythmic force to mark each beat of my lurching pulse. The mere effort to open my eyes was torture; and when I made an attempt to rise, my head fell back, causing me such agony that I must have swooned again.

When I came round next the pain was less distracting, and I opened my eyes and stared vaguely at the smoke-blackened rafters above me and sought to collect my dazed wits.

I was lying on my back on the stone flags of a room which was entirely strange to me, and utterly unlike anything I had ever seen in New York. A square room; the walls and low rafters alike dirty and smoke-begrimed; meagrely furnished with a wooden settle, two or three chairs, and a table on which a paraffin lamp was burning dimly. Something in the shape of the settle and chairs suggested a resemblance which my thoughts were too bewildered to fix. But certainly no place I had ever been in before.

How had I come there? Presently I remembered that I had been struck on the head; and with an effort I recalled what had occurred before the blow.

I had dined that evening with Gerald Thring at Delmonico's and had told him of old Giacommetti's appeal for help and of my intention to go to him in the Italian quarter.

"My dear Dalrymple, I wouldn't go there alone at night for a pile of dollars."

I remembered the warning and how I had laughed at it. I told him I had been there a hundred times and that I knew my New York far better than he did. We had parted on the steps of Delmonico's, he to go to the club, where I was to meet him later, and I to start on my prowling downtown.

I recalled the incidents of the stroll until I was near my destination, then the noise of a street trouble, the rush of footsteps behind me, and then the blow and sudden darkness.

Nothing more.

Gradually I began to reason. I had been robbed, of course; and when I could bear to move, I felt my pockets. The start I gave then sent a thrill of pain all through my body.

My clothes were all strange!

I had been in evening dress, wearing my tuxedo jacket and overcoat; and now there was not a single garment that belonged to me.

I lay pondering this. Evidently my assailants had carried me off to some low den or other, stripped off my clothes, and left me either to die or be discovered as might happen.

I felt my clothing again, more carefully. This time my hand encountered something hard fastened to my side.

It was the empty sheath of a dagger in a belt round my waist.

I fingered it in trembling wonderment, baffled and amazed

by the discovery. As I withdrew my hands I touched the cuff of my right sleeve. It was wet with some sticky, clinging substance. I held it before my eyes in the dim light of the lamp and shuddered.

It was *blood*!

In my horror at this I put my hands to the ground in the effort to rise. My left hand rested on a dagger.

I was almost afraid to look at it. And when at length I lifted it, I found the blade covered with blood.

What could it mean? I was not wounded; or at least felt no wound, save the injury to my head. I lay back and put my hand to the place. There was scarcely any blood on it; and I guessed I had been sandbagged.

I lay back and felt carefully all over my body for a wound from the dagger. There was nothing.

Then I tried to call out; but my voice was feeble from shock, horror, and weakness. Not a sound came in response. I was alone in the place—whatever place it was.

I lay still for a while pondering the problem; and now the suggestion of familiarity which had so puzzled me before recurred with clearer distinctness.

Had I not known that I was in New York, I should have said the room was one in an Italian peasant's house. I had seen many such rooms in Sicily when I had lived in Italy some years before. I must have been attacked by some Italians, and they had carried me off to one of their homes in the outskirts of New York.

After another effort I raised myself on my elbow to look about me. I stared at the deadly blood-stained knife lying close to me, and from that to the sheath at my side. My eyes widened in amazement when I saw that the one



fitted the other. The knife must have been fastened about me, therefore.

Why?

Again I lay back trying to grapple with this fresh problem. Why should anyone endeavour to make it appear that I was armed with such a weapon?

My pain was now much less, my strength returning, and my brain working with less effort. The instinct of self-preservation awoke. Whoever my assailants were, they would probably soon return; and I must lose no time in getting away to the police.

I began to scramble laboriously to my feet, therefore, and at that moment my eyes fell on something which turned my blood to ice.

Beyond the end of the rough table a man's legs protruded, stiff, motionless, rigid.

I stared at them, fascinated with new and horrifying apprehension.

Slowly and painfully I dragged myself nearer, until first the body was visible and then the face. The man was lying on his back, stone dead, and the blood from a thrust through the heart lay stagnating in a little pool close to the left side.

In the start of horror I gave at the sight, I threw my head back, and in a long common mirror on the wall opposite me I saw the reflection of my face.

Mine; yet not mine surely. An hour or so before I had been clean shaven. But the face I saw reflected there was half hidden by a beard.

God! I had surely gone mad!

I stared at myself like one spellbound, and presently rose and went close to the mirror, scrutinising myself long and earnestly from head to foot.

I could not believe the evidence of my own eyes!

Could the scarecrow I saw in the glass be the reflection of myself—Cuthbert Dalrymple, the sprucely tailored, well-groomed man of fashion, whose care in dress was a source of chaffing comment among friends at the club and in Fifth Avenue?

The figure at which I was staring was garbed like an Italian peasant, wearing a beard of many weeks' growth, unwashed, unkempt, and swarthy with the tan of the sun. A character straight from a scene of comic opera, except that it was too dirty and tawdry to pass the eyes of the stage manager.

My first inclination was to burst into a loud laugh; but the laugh was killed on my lips by the trembling fear, which seized and held me at the solution which flashed next into my thoughts.

The blow which had been struck must have bereft me of my reason for the time. Weeks must have passed; and I had been put away in restraint. I was a lunatic. With an almost insane impulse, I tugged at my beard as if to drag away the convincing evidence of the lapse of time, and laughed like a shivering fool when it resisted my efforts.

Then I buried my face in my hands and burst into a passionate flood of tears. I was mad; and in a mad-house; and at the thought all else was forgotten, and I fell on my knees in a paroxysm of overwhelming, irresistible misery.

Death was better than madness, was my next thought; and remembering the dagger which I had found by my side I resolved to use it to end my life.

As I turned I saw again the dead man, whose presence I had forgotten; and the sight brought about a strange

revulsion of feeling. I rejoiced at it now. If I had really been in a madhouse, this thing would not, could not have occurred.

I bent over the face and examined it closely. It was strange to me. I had never set eyes on the man before. The dress was that of a well-to-do man; the face distinctly Italian; the whole aspect evidenced respectability and position.

How, then, could we have met? What could have thrown us together? I had no recollection. Could he be another victim of the miscreants who had struck me down? Was this one of New York's murder dens, of which I had heard ugly rumours? Had I been in reality out of my mind and kept in close confinement by these wretches, and had they brought this dead man to the place and left me with him in order to account for his death? Was it to be laid at my door, as the act of a man unaccountable for his acts?

Could it indeed be possible that in my mania I had slain him?

I rose from beside him with my brain in a whirl and staggered back into a chair, looking helplessly about me. I fought against the damning thought that his blood might be on my head and tried to reason. The man had been killed with a dagger thrust; that was clear; I had found the weapon by my side on recovering my senses; and I had the empty sheath in my belt.

I fetched the knife and tried if it would fit the sheath; and to my infinite horror discovered that it did. The agony of that moment was beyond words. It was proof that my worst fears were but too well grounded.

I was a murderer!

I sought with the frenzy of despair to recall something

of the circumstances under which the deed had been done. But in vain. With the return of my reason, all recollection of what had passed during the period of my madness had gone. I was sane enough now, indeed, and realised that no one would believe I had been mad when I had done this fearsome thing. As a sane man I should be held responsible for that deed of madness; and death would be the penalty.

It was beyond my power to prove my innocence. Apathy seized upon me then. I would make no effort to escape. I would face the consequences, let them be what they might.

I sat by the side of my victim dumfounded by the sense overwhelming calamity and waited, almost as if the power to move and attempt to save myself had left me.

The stillness of the death watch was oppressive, awesome, intolerable. A prey to morbid forecasts of the fate in store for me, I began to long for the coming of those who would drag me away to trial and punishment; I saw the grim procession of events: my arrest, examination, my trial, the jeers which my story would produce; my conviction, and lastly the end—a shameful death in the chair.

Then, all suddenly, the oppressive silence was broken. Not as I had anticipated, by the coming of the police; but by a woman's cry somewhere above in the house.

I rose, trembling and shivering, so shaken were my nerves; and as I stood irresolute, the cry was repeated. A cry for help.

I staggered to a door at the farther end of the room and thrust it open. To my left hand was a narrow staircase. Returning for the lamp, I passed up the rickety stairway to a room above.

"Who calls?" I asked, as I thrust the door open and entered the room, holding the lamp high above my head.

Another cry was the response, this time low and fear-filled.

It came from a girl lying bound on the pallet bed.

I set down the lamp and turned to her.

Her face was toward me—the most beautiful face I had ever seen in my life—and as I made to approach the bed, she shrank from me, her large lustrous deep blue eyes filled with horror, and yet another cry of fear broke from her lips, as if she recognised me. “Beppo Serrano! Holy Mother, protect me!”

At the words I halted abruptly and stood staring at her, spellbound in surprise, admiration, and bewilderment.

## CHAPTER II

### MASITA

I HAD never seen, never even conceived a fairer picture of beauty, awed and terror-held, than that which the girl presented as she stared wide-eyed at me.

A mass of rich golden hair, dishevelled in lovely confusion, clustered about a broad forehead now scored with lines of alarm; straight eyebrows, dark in hue, drawn almost together over deeply lashed large eyes of the colour of the Mediterranean on a cloudless day; a nose as exquisitely shaped as that of a Greek goddess, the nostrils dilated, as the strenuous breath came quickly through the chiselled lips slightly parted and revealing a row of white and even teeth.

For the moment I stood gazing at her incapable of speech. The enigma of her presence in such a place and at such a time amazed me.

We looked thus for a space at one another in silence; she, fear-filled; I, lost in sheer bewilderment. Then with a low cry of unmistakable horror she breathed once more her prayer to the Virgin for help, and buried her face in the pillow.

Her movement and the intense earnestness of her prayer broke the spell which had held me. She spoke in Italian; but although I spoke the language as readily as my own, I replied in English.

"You are in great trouble, but I will help you. I am a friend."

At the sound of my voice she started and looked up at me again. Intense surprise was now mingled with the terror in her eyes.

"You are Beppo Serrano," she murmured, after a second's pause.

Why she should call me by this name I did not of course understand; but I did not stop then to ask. The first thing to do was to loose her bonds, and I moved to the bedside.

"Let me unfasten the cords which bind you—if I can, that is," I said.

Again her reply filled me with astonishment. "You tied them yourself, and should know how to loosen them."

"I tied them!" I exclaimed involuntarily, as I bent down to examine them.

Whoever had done the work had done it well. I tried as gently as I could to unravel the knots; but failing, drew the knife from the sheath at my side to cut them. As I did so she drew in her breath quickly with a shudder. I think she saw the traces of blood upon it.

"Have no fear," I murmured. "I will not harm you."

I severed first the cord which bound her legs and then that which held her arms. The hemp had deeply indented the fair skin and the efforts she had made to release herself had lacerated it. She did not notice the hurts, but kept her eyes fixed steadily on mine, as if I were some wild beast whom she hoped to hold in check by the power of her gaze.

When I had done the task I stepped back a few paces and stood by the little table on which I had placed the lamp.

She tried to rise; but the rush of the released blood through the arteries enfeebled her, so that she could not

stand. As she fell back on the bed, I stepped forward again to offer my help; but she shrank from me; and again I noticed the look of horror and fear and loathing.

"You need not fear me," I said reassuringly. Then a thought occurred to me. I laid the knife on the bed, "I have no other weapon," I declared.

This act had more effect than my words. She picked up the knife and placed it well out of my reach; and then set to work to restore her circulation.

I stood in considerable hesitation what to do next, and was backing to the door to leave her alone, when she turned to me.

"Why have you done this?"

"You are in trouble, why should I not do it?"

"Why do you speak to me in English? You have some purpose. What is it?"

"My only wish now is to help you. Can I do anything further? You have only to speak and I will do all I can."

She could stand up now and she rose, keeping the bed between us, and faced me.

"You are Beppo Serrano; scarcely an hour ago you helped to bring me by force to this room and yourself bound me with these," and she pointed to the cords on the bed. "Why do you release me now?"

"Do you mean that I have ever seen you before?"

The question seemed to anger her. "Do you seek to fool me with such a question?" she cried indignantly. "Do you think I lie, or am mad?"

The word recalled my former fears for my own sanity.

"It is I who must have been mad," I replied, with a shudder. "I have never seen you until this moment."

She laughed scornfully. "So this your pretence, is it?"



This is the meaning of your English speech. I know you too well for such a trick to serve you. What is your object? You have some further villainy to perpetrate." The words were hotly spoken; and with a sudden start she laughed even more angrily than before and cried: "I think I understand. You mean me to kill myself with this," and her fingers closed round the haft of the hagger.

"God forbid," I exclaimed earnestly. "I have no such thought. Test me as you will. Let me help you."

My sincerity appeared to have some effect upon her. She laid down the dagger and looked at me very steadily and with renewed curiosity. "I don't understand you. What has occurred to work such a change in Beppo Seranno toward me?"

"You appear to know me well. Do you mean that you know me by the name you have now spoken three times?"

She made a gesture of impatience. "Who else do you pretend to be?"

The mystery was deepening. How could she know me, Cuthbert Dalrymple, by such a name and as an Italian? And then some glimmering of the truth began to break in upon my bewildered wits. The blow I had received in the Italian quarter must have destroyed my memory. The growth of my beard had proved that a long interval had elapsed since the attack; and in the meantime something must have occurred which had led to my being mistaken for this Italian, Beppo Seranno; the name by which she knew me now.

What could have occurred in the interval to cause such a mistake? The thought appalled me. I staggered back against the wall and put my hand to my head in utter desolation and bewilderment. If what she said were the truth, I must indeed have been mad. I must have been a

different man altogether; some scoundrelly Italian whose mere presence had been enough to steep her very soul in dread and loathing of me.

"You do not answer my question," she said, breaking the long silence.

Her voice recalled me. I would at least learn from her so much as she could tell me; but would hold my secret from her until I knew more. I answered her this time in Italian. "I make no pretence. What place is this?"

"So you have not quite forgotten your own tongue," she said. "That part of the pretence is over at any rate." Her tone was one of scornful disdain. "Do you admit that you are Beppo Serrano?"

"Whatever you declare to be the truth I will admit. What house is this?"

"You do not know that it is a cottage on my estate? You have never seen me before, you said; you do not know therefore that I am Masita Correggio; that I was brought here to-night on the pretence that my brother was in danger; that the magistrate, Signor Vicino, was here when you and the others arrived; that you with them dragged me to this room; and that you with your own hands bound me and ordered me under pain of death to keep silent."

I listened with such amazement as may be imagined. "I have received a blow on the head and my memory has suffered. I remember nothing of what you say. I do not even know where the estate is of which you speak."

"Ah, it is infamous. It is but a part of your evil cunning," she burst out with great heat. "You will pretend you do not know we are in Sicily; that you have never heard of Carlo Beltano, the leader of your band; nor of Molta, his sister, and your affianced wife; nor of Giuseppe, nor of Ahmet, the Turk, nor Breva, nor Pepita.

You know nothing, of course. You have never been on Beltano's island, I suppose? Such lies would be worthy of you. You have some motive for them all. Say what your fresh purpose is with me and carry it out. You have at least the reputation of courage—the courage of a wild beast, maybe; but yet enough to let you tell the truth and let me know the worst."

With what profound dismay I listened, as she reeled off these facts in the form of indignant questions I cannot describe. Every reference was of course utterly strange to me, and the mention of them stirred no answering memory. That she was speaking the truth, or what she believed to be the truth, was without question. I did not doubt her for a moment, although her story showed that while I had lost my identity I had journeyed across the ocean, had been living in Italy, had built up for myself a new character as a member of some band, and had wooed and won the love of the woman she called Molta. Apparently my new career was that of a Sicilian desperado and scoundrel.

The reference which touched me most closely at that moment was the mention of the woman to whom I was said to be affianced, and this was due to my newly aroused feelings for the beautiful girl who thus told me of her.

But I was soon sufficiently master of myself to be able to answer calmly. "I have already told you the worst of my purpose in regard to you. It is to help you. All I ask is that you put me to the test. You believe that you are in some danger from the man you have mentioned, Carlo Beltano? You are in none from me. Do you wish to leave here?"

But at this professed desire to assist her her face hardened. "You have some secret scheme against me. Some

ambush into which you would lead me. I know you too well to trust myself to you."

"Your words leave no doubt that you believe you have reason to distrust me. It must be as you will. But you are free to leave here; and if I can help you to safety, I declare to you on my honour that you may rely upon me."

"I do not believe you. Stand away from the door and let me pass, if you are not lying to me."

I went at once to the other end of the room. She picked up the dagger from the bed and then took the lamp, keeping her eyes on me the whole time as she went slowly to the door.

I let her go and made no effort to follow her down the rickety stairway. I heard her move along the passage from the stairs to the door and try to open it. She failed and then called to me. "You have the key of this. Throw it down."

"I have no key," I replied.

"Yet it is locked. You are deceiving me."

"I have not locked it. I know nothing of it. If you wish, I will break it open for you. I am not deceiving you."

She made no reply, and I heard her enter the room where the dead man lay. The next instant she screamed; and I knew she had seen the body.

I ran down then. She was standing by the side of the body with the lamp in her hand; her face was as white as salt, and she was trembling so violently that I feared the lamp would fall from her hand.

"This is your work then," she cried. "You are a murderer. You have murdered Signor Vicino. Your knife has his blood upon the blade."

I had no answer. I could not deny the charge. I did not know. She paused as if expecting a denial; and when

I held my tongue, she shuddered and flung the knife from her, as if it were a thing accursed. Placing the lamp on the table, she fell back against the wall and stared at me, her hands pressed against her labouring bosom.

"You sent me down that I should see this," she murmured in a low tone.

"I know nothing of it. I can neither deny nor admit it," I answered.

I met her eyes; and for a moment we looked at one another across the dimly lighted squalid room in silence, I was abashed and pained that I could not clear myself of the deed of which she believed me guilty, and I winced and cowered before the loathing her face expressed for me—the assassin.

She broke the tense silence at length.

"I see your purpose now," she said, her voice low, deliberate, and as hard as steel with hatred and resolve. "You offer me my liberty as the price of my silence about this. Such an offer is an offence to me. Do with me as you will. Kill me, too, if you dare. Add another deed of blood to the foul work of this night; but do not dream that you can make me a partner in your crime. Listen to me. On my knees I swear to the Holy Virgin that the first use I make of my liberty shall be to denounce you for the murderer you are!" and she fell on her knees and uttered the vow with impassioned fervour, raising her hands on high as if to invoke the wrath of Heaven upon me.

Then she rose and faced me, her hands clenched, every muscle tense, features and gestures alike instinct with defiance, as if expecting that I should at once answer her threat with an attempt on her life.

More splendid courage than she showed in this daring avowal of the use she would make of her liberty if I let

her go, I had never witnessed. She was entirely in my power; she had cast away the weapon I had placed in her hands; she felt that it was her life or mine; she was convinced that my hands were red with the blood I had just shed; and that I was fiend enough to shed hers in self-defence. And yet she threatened me and set me at defiance in this way.

Small wonder that while every pulse in my body quickened with admiration for her, I burned with the desire to be able to right myself in her eyes, to show that I was no longer the wretch she held me to be, to quench her fierce hatred, and to prove myself worthy of her confidence.

I could not trust myself to speak, and with a deep sigh I turned away and went to the door to open it. But it resisted my efforts and I returned to the room.

"I cannot open it," I said bluntly. "I will force the window."

She could not even then believe I was sincere. "You mean you will let me go?" she asked. I made no reply. "I shall keep my vow," she added.

"Do as you will. Send whom you will here; I will await their coming;" and with that I laid my hand to the shutter of the window and began to tear it down.

Just as I was succeeding there came a loud knocking at the door and a voice called: "Beppo! Open! Open!"

"It is Beltano," she said in a low voice.

"You fear him?" I asked, seeing that her cheek paled.

The voices of two or three men in consultation reached us, and the knocking at the door was repeated.

"Is there any other way out of the house? Any windows at the back?" I asked quickly.

She shook her head. "I am lost," she murmured.

"I have been hurt and cannot protect you against more than one," I said.

"It is a trap. You have laid it," she cried.

"On my soul, no," I replied fervently. "I would save you if I could."

"Break in the window. He may be dying," said another voice outside.

"You must leave me to do as I will," I said to her; "and I will try to find means to help you later. You say I am one of them. For the time at least I must keep up that pretence."

With that I cried to the men outside and wrenched away the fastening of the window. "Is that you, Beltano?"

In another moment the window was forced from without and a tall, dark, handsome fellow sprang into the room.

"Beltano!" exclaimed my companion, shrinking back in evident fear of him.

"What's the trouble, Beppo?" he asked.

"You come in the nick of time, man. The signorina was trying to escape, and in another moment you would have been too late."

Beltano laughed and then turned and made her a deep bow.

For an instant she hesitated, trembling, and then, with a glance of disdain at me for the lie I had uttered, she drew herself up and faced us resolutely, as three other men clambered through the window.

## CHAPTER III

### BELTANO

As the other men entered I felt my strength giving out. The room reeled around me and I was staggering when a young muscular fellow of about twenty years of age caught me in his arms.

"Beppo is done," he called.

"Look to him, Breva," said Beltano.

These were the last words I heard for the time. Breva, the young fellow who had come to my assistance, laid me gently down on the floor and I swooned.

When I came to myself he was bending over me and forcing some brandy between my lips.

"I thought you were done for, Beppo," he said with a sigh of relief.

"I'm only weak. The crack on my head."

"Drink this." It was brandy; and he supported my head, handling me as gently and carefully as a woman would have done, and his large dark eyes were full of solicitude.

The spirit revived me. "I am better again," I murmured, with a sigh. "Where are the others?" I asked, seeing that we two were alone.

"Ahmet and Luigi have taken away Vicino's body and Beltano is with the signorina. He is mad that Vicino has been killed. He told me to call him the moment you recovered."

With that he laid me down on a pillow he had made of



some coats, and called to Beltano that I was conscious. I heard a door shut and locked, and the next instant Beltano entered. His swarthy handsome face was as black as a night cloud.

"Why were my orders disobeyed, Beppo?"

"Who disobeyed them?" I replied, at a loss to understand him.

"Who else but you? You knew the whole plan—that Signor Vicino was to be captured, not knifed. You knew that the object of the whole thing was to extort from him all that he knew and to hold him to ransom. Why did you kill him?"

"I don't remember anything. Did I kill him?"

"Isn't this your knife?" he asked, showing me the weapon which I had found close to my side on my first return to consciousness. "He was killed with this and the signorina declares you admitted having done it."

"I don't know," I said. "I did not."

The reply incensed him. "Don't try to fool me," he cried.

"I was struck on the head by someone and can remember nothing."

"I will have a better tale than that," he declared, and launched out into a long tirade against me for having disobeyed his orders and spoilt his plans. From this I was able to gather that he had been acting under the orders of some man of influence in making the attack upon the murdered man; that very important results were anticipated from the capture; that the victim had been in possession of plans which it was of the most critical importance to discover; that his death had jeopardised everything; and that he was a magistrate of such influence that his murder might bring disaster upon us all.

"I gave the matter into your hands to deal with," he concluded, "you know that. And now you have ruined everything. I had better have trusted to Giuseppe. You are too ready with the knife. Too reckless to be safe."

I took my cue from this last sentence. "Have you finished, Beltano? If not, swear away and get through with it and then talk sense. I tell you I know nothing of what happened here. If I killed the man, I killed him. That's all. Neither oaths nor abuse of me will bring him back to life. Do what you will."

"Who struck you?"

"How the devil do I know, man? That's a fool's question. Nothing less."

"Breva declares that it was Vicino himself."

"Was Breva here?"

He started at the simple question and looked at me as if I were mad. "Are you going to tell you don't know that?"

"Have you ever found me to lie, Beltano?"

"No, by the Cross, I haven't." His tone was very serious, and he came and knelt by my side. "Do you really mean that you remember nothing at all? You must have had a devil of a crack on the head."

"Make what you will of it. I am speaking no less and no more than the truth when I tell you I don't remember a thing that has ever passed here before I came to and found myself alone with the dead body."

"You remember coming here with Giuseppe and Drako surely; and that you yourself arranged the whole trap to get Vicino and the signorina here?"

"Not a thing," I replied, passing my hand across my brow. "I remember coming to and finding the sheath of my dagger empty and the dagger close to my side; and

the dead man there by the table. And then I heard the signorina cry for help, and I went up and cut her bonds, wondering how the devil she came to be in such a plight; and she vowed she would denounce me for the murder and I was fool enough and helpless enough to watch her trying to escape when you all came. Now you've got the story; all I can tell, that is. You must get the rest from the others."

He listened intently, his face showing more consideration than before, and he got up and paced to and fro across the room in thought.

"If I did kill him, I'm sorry, Beltano. I don't want the man's blood on my head. Why did the rest leave me alone here?"

"Breva hunted me out and told me they were afraid that the carabinieri were coming and fled. I rushed here at once. The signorina declares that she will keep her vow and denounce you as the murderer. We can't have that, and must return to the island as soon as possible."

"I think I'm strong enough to move now," I said, and with a big effort I struggled to my feet.

"We'd better start then. I shall take Vicino's body to the island and keep the fact of his death secret. It's the only way; and you must be nursed. Molta will see to that."

"I'm ready," I agreed. "And what about the signorina?"

Before he could reply to the question there came a loud knocking at the door.

"The carabinieri," he said in a low voice. "Go into the room where Breva is watching Masita and leave me to explain things."

I did as he directed and he unbarred the windows.

As I entered the other room, Masita looked up, and the expression of half fearsome anticipation changed to the look of loathing I had already seen so often.

"What is the knocking, Beppo?" asked Breva.

"The carabinieri."

"The Holy Virgin be thanked," cried Masita.

"Why, signorina?" asked Breva.

"Because they will punish this wretch for his crime," was the instant reply.

He glanced at her and from her to me and shrugged his shoulders. "Beltano will have a word or two to say about that first. It will depend upon who the men are. There are very few men who care to play the fool with him. Eh, Beppo?"

"Let it be as it will," I replied curtly.

"I will see that they do this at any rate," declared Masita resolutely.

At that Breva drew out his knife. "No one shall touch Beppo," he said grimly.

"Put up your knife, Breva. The signorina will do what she pleases."

"She has sworn to accuse you of this murder."

"She will do what she pleases, Breva," I repeated.

"Not while I'm here," he retorted meaningly.

We waited for a few hanging moments in suspense, listening for sounds of the men's coming; and Breva's eyes never left Masita's face.

"This is unbearable," she cried at length, "I shall go to them. Do not think you shall escape."

"You cannot leave this room, signorina," declared Breva sternly.

"I shall keep my vow."

"Then you must change the terms of it," he retorted.

She rose and moved toward the door; and he put himself in her path, holding the drawn knife by his side.

"Do you dare to threaten me?" she cried.

He made no reply except to raise the weapon slightly.

With an unexpected action I seized his hand and wrested away the knife. "Do as you will, signorina," I said.

"Are you mad, Beppo?" exclaimed Brevia.

Masita stopped, surprise in every feature, as she stared at me.

Brevia set his back to the door. "Stand away from the door, Brevia, or we shall quarrel," I told him. "Let the signorina do as she says. She has made a vow. Let her keep it if she will."

Brevia held his place stubbornly before the door and blocked her way. Masita looked from one to the other of us in mounting astonishment.

"Let me pass, Brevia," she said at length.

"Do you think the men there are tired of their lives? Do you know Beltano so ill as to think that if you were to do what you threaten he would let them touch Beppo? Do you wish to see more bloodshed? Your first word to them would be the signal for their death. Leave things to go their own course. Only a woman would play the fool in this way."

Masita halted in hesitation. Then she turned to me.

"That is why you told Brevia to let me pass then? You believe what he says as to the consequences?"

Her hatred and prejudice against me were such that she would take none but the blackest view of my every word and act. "You must judge as seems best to you," I answered bluntly, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Do as you will. Leave the door clear, Brevia," I added as I approached him.

"You are as mad as she, Beppo. Beltano ordered me to keep her in this room."

"You know me, Brevia. Do as I say."

"You are hurt and not fit to judge this thing," he replied, holding his ground.

"Do as I say," I repeated.

But instead of complying he opened the door quickly and went out, exclaiming, "I will tell Beltano."

"The way is clear, signorina," I said instantly.

But instead of following Brevia she hesitated again, as if unable to believe that I could let her go in this way to betray me.

I understood her thoughts. "I have no subtle motive. If you deem it right to do what you have said, do it. But if you hesitate, the chance will pass you."

"I don't understand you," she murmured.

"I shall not stop you. That is all. I believe you are doing a mad thing; a thing which, as Brevia says, may endanger the lives of these police. But you may feel bound by your vow. If you think this act will save you, do as you think. I am willing to give my life to save you; and as well this way as another."

"I would not take your help," she replied, shrinking from me.

"Then try your own way," I said curtly, and crossing my arms leant back against the wall.

Our eyes met, and for a second I thought she felt something of the sincerity of my wish to help her. But the next she shuddered, her face hardened, her lip drew down, her glance changed to one of loathing, and she turned to rush out of the room to carry out her purpose.

But it was too late. Beltano barred her path, his face wearing a confident smile.

"Where would you go, Masita?"

"To denounce this wretch for his crime," she replied firmly.

"You are too late. The police have gone. You must not think too harshly of Beppo. Nor must you interfere in this. It does not concern you."

"I have sworn to accuse him, and I will," she declared.

He shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands, and his smile broadened as he shook his head, answering in an indulgent tone. "You must try to curb your pretty impatience. Beppo is in my care."

"Let her go, Beltano," I said.

He shot a glance of astonishment at me. "Has that crack on the head made a fool of you, Beppo?"

"Let her go," I repeated.

"Enough of this," he replied with a gesture of impatience. "We are returning at once to the island. Signorina, I shall have to ask you to honour us with your presence there until you have abandoned this impossible desire."

"You will not dare to make me a prisoner?" she cried hotly.

"You can never be other than an honoured guest in my home, Masita. You know that," he answered. I observed how he looked at her as he said this, and began to understand his real reasons. He loved her.

"Let her go, Beltano," I said again. "I am not afraid of what she may do."

"Do you order my acts, or I yours, Beppo?" he retorted very sharply. "Let it be as I say. Breva, help Beppo. Come, signorina, allow me to be your escort."

With that he led her away and I followed, leaning on Breva's arm.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ISLAND

I WAS feeling very weak and dizzy as the result of my injury, and had to lean heavily on Breva as we left the hut. I did not know how far we had to go, but it was certain that I should not have sufficient strength to walk any great distance. I stumbled once or twice and should have fallen had he not held me up.

"We shall reach the horses soon, Beppo," he told me; and I was glad to hear the news.

"I can keep up for a bit yet," I replied. "But my head's dizzy."

"Why did you try to fool the signorina by pretending that she could go to the police, just now?"

"I wasn't fooling her, Breva. I meant her to go if she wished."

"Why?"

"She had made a vow to accuse me."

He laughed. "Are you suddenly tired of your life? It isn't much like you. She meant trouble. The very devil was in her eyes as she looked at you."

"But nothing happened, you see."

"Not her fault," he retorted drily. "She believes you stabbed Vicino."

"Well, didn't I?"

"Who can answer that better than yourself, man?"

"It's devilish queer, I suppose, but I don't know."

"What do you mean by that?"



I reflected that I had better stick to the tale I had told Beltano. It was the truth; and as I should have to account to the rest for the change which they would certainly find in me, the truth was the simplest line. I could keep the fact of my identity to myself. "The fact is, Breva, that blow I got on the head has knocked everything else out of it. I don't know who struck me, nor when I was struck, nor anything before the blow. I had forgotten even that I was Beppo Serrano until Masita yonder told me."

"Is it as bad as that? I am sorry," he replied; and the arm with which he was supporting me pressed me the closer as if in sympathy. "I don't think it was you who killed Vicino, for all that you are so reckless. I told Beltano I thought you were struck by Vicino; but that was a lie. I believe Giuseppe did it; you know how often I have warned you against him. Ever since you came to us he has hated you on Molta's account; and after that day you fought Drako because of me, the two have joined against you, and the hearts of both have been black with murder thoughts. I believe they have done all this to-night's business together."

"Tell me," I urged when he paused. "It was my dagger that killed the man."

"I don't know things for certain; I can only guess. Vicino made a sturdy fight for his life and in the struggle I could see but little; but I remember you calling out that his life must not be taken; and I am almost sure you were down when he was still fighting. And afterwards when the thing was done, those two raised the cry that the carabinieri were coming and hustled me out of the hut. As we hurried off, I heard something which made me think they meant to bring them there; and I jumped to

the conclusion that they had planned it so that you should be taken. I got away, and knowing that Beltano was at Solferino's, I ran there at top speed and brought him."

"You saved me, Brevia; and have more than squared the accounts between us," I said, referring to what he had said about my having fought this Drako on his account.

"Not by a long way yet," he replied simply. "Drako made life hell for me and for Pepita, too, until you stopped him; and he'd have killed me to have her to himself. This is only a little thing."

I remembered that Masita had spoken of Pepita; and I wondered who she was, but thought it better not to ask. We walked some way in silence and presently I heard voices and he said: "The horses are just here. You'll be strong enough to ride?"

When we came up to the others, Masita was already mounted and Beltano was standing by her horse's head holding another horse by the bridle.

"This is for you, Beppo," he said, and putting the bridle into Brevia's hand went off with Masita. As I was clambering into the saddle I saw some figures moving on ahead in the gloomy shadows of the night.

"Who are they?" I asked Brevia.

"Ahmet and Luigi with Vicino's body," he replied. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I said; and we started, Brevia striding out quickly by my side.

The cool air had served to revive me considerably and I was now able to think matters over much more connectedly than before. I was beginning to get the hang of things. It was clear that my former surmise was correct. The blow I had received in New York had in some way injured my brain and I had lost all knowledge of my

identity; and the blow to-night had removed the obstruction, whatever it had been, and restored me to myself.

In the meantime I had not been, as I had so greatly feared, a lunatic in the sense in which we commonly interpret the term. I had become this other man, Beppo Serrano, and must have played the part with all the semblance of complete sanity.

But every act and thought and word during that interval was a sealed book to me. How had I come to Sicily, why had I taken the name by which I was known, and how I could have become associated with the desperate men who were now my companions, was a complete mystery.

I could hazard a guess at the reason for my presence in Italy. It was in the Italian quarter of New York that I had been struck down; and when the ruffians who had attacked me found that I was not dead, but had no recollection of my identity, it was possible that they had considered it less risky to pack me across the Atlantic as an Italian than to kill me and dispose of my body.

I did not yet know how long a time had elapsed since that first attack; but I gathered that it must have been many weeks and perhaps months. My people at home had no doubt come to the conclusion that I was dead; and I tried for a while to think what could have been the reason for the attack and who could have instigated it.

I knew that my father had enemies among the Italians, and that he had been threatened more than once by the Black Hand gang. He had only laughed at the idea of any danger from such a quarter; but I saw now that it was quite possible the attack upon me might have come from there.

The present was, however, more important than the past; and I had to decide what course to take. Should I let my

people know at once that I was still alive or attempt first to ascertain if there was any connection between Beltano and the men who had sought my life?

The decision was not easy as it would have been a few hours earlier—before I had seen Masita, in fact. I was eager to learn more about her. Her glorious beauty had dazzled my eyes and bewitched my senses; I knew that she was in danger from this Beltano and his men; it was possible I might save her; and in my present mood the thought of flight seemed just miserable cowardice. And far stronger than my reluctance to abandon her was the overpowering desire to change her thoughts of me, to right myself in her eyes, and to force her to look upon me as far other than the scoundrelly cutthroat she held me to be.

It was quixotic, if you will. To remain a member of Beltano's band was to run the risk that she herself would be the first to accuse me of a crime of which I could not prove my innocence—of which, indeed, I myself did not know whether I was innocent or guilty. But I was in love; and the mere thought of being able to help her and change her opinion of me—I dared not hope to do more—was in itself enough to quicken my pulses and set me gritting my teeth with resolve.

I would stay, at least for a time; until I had recovered from the effects of my injury, until I had found a chance to help her, perhaps until I saw that my wild thoughts of winning her round were indeed hopeless.

But I should have to act warily. She was being taken to the island on my account—to prevent her accusing me of this murder; and my first step must be to remove the reason for her detention. I must either prove my innocence of the deed or secure her escape from what would be a prison in all but the name.

This meant that I must continue to deceive the rest of my companions and, what would be much more difficult, must find the means of convincing Masita herself that I meant her nothing but good.

I had reached that point in my thoughts when Breva broke in with a remark which reminded me of other difficulties.

"There will be woe in Molta's heart to-night, Beppo. She will be wild when she learns you are hurt."

I made no response. I recalled Masita's reference to my being betrothed to Beltano's sister; and the thought of it filled me with dismay. To remain a member of the band meant that I must act the part of this woman's lover. At any time a repulsive prospect; and a thousand times more so now that Masita was to be a witness of it all. I groaned at the thought of it.

"Is your hurt worse?" asked my companion, mistaking this for evidence of pain.

"I can't talk, Breva," I replied.

"There's only another mile or so," he said, intending to cheer me. "You'll be easier in the boat; and as soon as we reach the island Molta will look after you."

We continued our way in silence for a while, my thoughts now busy with the unpleasant prospect his words had called up. How was I to meet the woman to whom I must have made fierce love? What would she say to the change in me? Would her love-sharpened eyes detect how complete that change was? Could I hope to mislead her with the scant attentions I should have to force myself to pay her? Would she discover that my real reason for returning to her at all was my love for another woman? It was all baffling, disconcerting, and intolerably sickening to think of.

"You must watch Giuseppe and Drako when you meet, Beppo," broke in Brevia again. Silence appeared to be impossible to him. "Don't let them see that you don't remember who thrust the knife into Vicino's heart. Tell no one what you have told me about that."

"I have already told Beltano."

"He won't speak of it. I have made him suspect them. But be on your guard, and never forget they are dangerous."

"I am not likely to forget," I answered bluntly.

"Nor to talk either, I know. We don't call you Beppo the Silent, without good reason, any more than they call me the Swimmer."

"Do you call me that?"

"I don't. You have never been so with me; but the rest do—behind your back, of course," he added with a laugh. "They're afraid to to your face."

I was not sorry to hear of this reputation. Such a character would help in the task before me; and it was an easy one to live up to.

He continued to chatter in this way, letting out many things about the life on the island which I stored carefully in my memory for future use.

Giuseppe, it seemed, had been high in Molta's favour until my arrival, and had been second in command of the band, and thus his hate of me had two causes—jealousy and loss of power. Drako was a spying, cunning brute, ever ready with the knife in a quarrel; and he had tried to put a quarrel on Brevia on account of Pepita, a girl who loved Brevia and for whose sake alone the latter remained on the island. Drako had a sister, Agapa, who loved Beltano; and Brevia hinted that the leader had at one time made hot love to her.

I let him talk freely, replying now and then with a word or a grunt of approval or the reverse; and in this way the time passed until I heard the sound of the waves on the beach in the dark distance ahead of us.

Then Brevia checked the horse. "I'd better take the horse into Solferino's, and then help you down to the beach," he said.

"Is the horse Solferino's?" I asked.

He laughed. "Do you mean you have forgotten we always keep the horses there? You have been there often enough for one," he replied as I dismounted; and with another laugh he led the animal away.

Thinking that it might some day be useful for me to know the place, I followed and saw where he went. I had been riding for some time on a fairly good road; and when Brevia returned and we started for the beach, I saw where it turned and ran along close to the sea front.

"You recognise that that's the way to Trapani, I suppose. You've travelled it often enough," he said as we left it to go down to the beach.

"It's coming back to me," I replied, not thinking it well that even he should understand how completely I had forgotten everything.

"That's good news, Beppo," he cried gladly. "A few days' rest and you'll be yourself again. Praise to the Holy Virgin for that."

As he helped me down a somewhat precipitous path to the water's edge Beltano's voice called to us to hurry; and we found him and the others already on board a felucca which lay alongside a roughly constructed wooden landing-stage against the side of the rock.

The sail was already hoisted, and in the light wind blowing off the land the boat was straining like a hound on the

leash. Beltano held the tiller and Masita sat on one of the thwarts close to him, in an attitude of deep dejection.

"Hurry, man, hurry," he said, and helped me to clamber in, telling Breva to cast the boat loose. As we glided out I had to pass Masita, and she drew aside ostentatiously, as if a mere touch from me would be a contamination. Beltano saw the gesture and laughed, as if he were glad that she hated me.

I lay down amidships and presently Breva brought a spare sail and placed it carefully under my head.

As we left the shelter of the small bay the boat felt the wind more and we slipped through the water at a good speed. Breva crouched down by my side; Ahmet, the Turk, and Luigi being in the bows smoking, with the body of the dead man huddled up at their feet.

Except that now and again Beltano would stoop and say a word or two to Masita, none of us spoke at first. Even Breva, chatterer as he was, appeared to be depressed by the grimness of the conditions.

Once or twice I saw Masita glance toward the dead man, only to turn away at once with a shudder.

Presently Breva rolled a cigarette and lighted it, and then asked me if I would smoke. I had no such desire and lay thinking and watching the tiny glow of his cigarette until he tired of the silence, and slipped forward to the other two men and began to talk in low tones. And then I kept my eyes upon Masita, wondering vaguely what was in store for us both at the end of the weird journey.

Strange as it may seem, her mere presence reconciled me to my strange position. To be near her was a consolation; and the thought that I could devote myself, my life, if the need came, to the task of helping her out of her trouble was more than enough to gladden my heart.



In about an hour, so far as I could judge the time, there was a stir among the three men forward; and looking round I observed a light shining through the darkness straight ahead of us. I reckoned that we had come some six or seven miles from the mainland.

A lantern was hoisted to the masthead, and a few minutes later the sail was lowered and Ahmet and Luigi rowed until the boat glided smoothly between some rocks and was made fast to a landing stage, similar to that from which we started.

Beltano took Masita ashore first and directed Brevia to help me. The other two remained in the boat with their grim burden.

Two men were waiting for us on the stage and Beltano halted a moment to whisper some instructions and then disappeared into the gloom.

Brevia gave me his arm, and, although I did not now need his assistance, I leant heavily upon it that he should not see I was ignorant which way to go. The path led up some hundred feet, and then at a short distance I saw the lights of a house.

Close to it, Beltano and his companions were talking to two or three others and as I approached a woman uttered a cry of distress, rushed forward to meet me, and threw her arms round my neck.

I guessed of course that it was Molta; and as I endeavoured to put her arms away, the light was full upon me. I saw Masita's eyes rest for second upon us and her lip curled in scornful contempt.

Then she turned and passed into the house.

## CHAPTER V

### MOLTA

I did not see Masita again for some days. I passed the greater part of the time in bed, where I was carefully tended and nursed by Molta and the girl Pepita, of whom Breva had spoken to me.

Molta was a handsome woman of some five and twenty, dark as night, with regular features indicative of strength of character. The straight dark brows and firm thin lips spoke of a hot temper; and I had abundant evidence of the truth of the indications in her treatment of those about her.

For me she professed the most ardent affection, and she wearied me ineffably with her assiduous attentions and evidence of her feelings. It seemed almost as if she thought she could win me back to health by the mere protestations of love; and when she found me irresponsible, her eyes would flash with anger at one moment and melt into tears the next.

I conceived an instinctive dislike for her, indeed, and it was only with great effort I could restrain myself from showing it.

She could not avoid perceiving that there was a great change in me. Apparently I had been an ardent lover, giving caress for caress, and when now I turned away from her or submitted uneasily to her lavish proofs of affection, she would upbraid me roundly for my coldness one instant, and the next break out into wild storms of grief, attributing the change to some serious injury to my brain.

She was a passionate, stormy creature of extremes of

feeling and emotion; utterly without self-control; unbridled, and a complete slave to the feelings of the moment.

Had I been in reality as ill as she thought, her treatment of me would have retarded my recovery, even if it had not destroyed all chance of it. But I purposely affected to be worse than I was, because I wished to use the time of convalescence to learn all I could of the position of matters on the island.

I discovered that her influence was almost as great as that of Beltano himself and that even he hesitated before doing anything to which she was opposed. All those on the island obeyed her as readily as they did her brother, and a flash from her dark eyes or a hot word or two was enough to secure instant compliance on their part.

I gathered that in her opinion the men on the island were, with one or two exceptions, a poor set of creatures. Beltano and Molta owned the whole of it; and the olive groves and wheat lands were carefully and profitably cultivated for their benefit. They appeared to live on the proceeds; although Beltano received considerable sums of money for certain secret services rendered to some rich man, always spoken of as "the Count," who lived on an estate on the mainland close to the sea.

One of such services had been the abduction of the magistrate, Vicino. "The Count" had been the virtual ruler of the province, it appeared, but was now under a political cloud; and Vicino had been a formidable opponent in possession of information which was to have been extorted from him under pressure during a period of captivity on the island. The result would have been his overthrow and the victory of "the Count," with a return to political power. His murder had, however, prevented this little plot, and as his death had in some way leaked out, there had been such

a commotion that Beltano was genuinely alarmed and apprehensive of serious trouble.

From the open way in which both Beltano and Molta spoke to me about it all, it was clear that I had been close in their confidence; and that I had taken a chief part in getting Vicino to the place where he had met his death. I discovered that the reason for this lay in the fact that I was the only person on the island who could write well.

The scheme I had hatched was as small a credit to my cunning as it was eloquent of my lack of scruple. Vicino had been an admirer of Masita; and I had written him a letter, purporting to come from her, asking him to go to the hut to help her secretly in getting her brother, Julius, a scamp and a wastrel, out of trouble. The hut was on her estate, and I had forged an urgent message from Julius to Masita, begging her to come to the same place at once, I did not at first ascertain why her presence had been necessary; but I learnt later, and cursed myself for the part I had played. Beltano's plan was to carry off the two with the object of compelling Masita to become his wife, while leaving it to be believed that Vicino had abducted her.

The bait had been taken by both; but the results had been disastrous, owing to the murder of the magistrate; and Molta bitterly reproached me for having killed him.

"If it had been any other than you, Beppo, it would not have mattered," she cried once. "He could have been given up and all might have been arranged. But I will die before I let them touch a hair of your head. Why did you do it? You are always so reckless, and now think of what it means."

"I have told you I know nothing of what passed," I replied.

I had repeated to her what I had already told to Beltano and Breva.

"A mere blow on the head would not do that."

"It did it, Molta. That is all," I replied bluntly. "I don't lie."

"But you are so wilful. You take your own way at all times. You never stop to think. You may have ruined us."

"Ah, you weary me," I exclaimed. "What I have done, I have done. Give me to the carabinieri if you will and I will answer to them."

"Beppo!" she cried excitedly, and broke into a torrent of reproaches that I should even think her capable of such treachery. "When I love you so."

I turned to her with a smile. "Ah, Molta, you don't understand. Do you think I would not rather suffer any punishment they could inflict than that an act of mine should harm you?"

At the words she melted instantly. Her eyes glowed and she seized my hand and covered it with kisses. "Those are the first words of thought for me you have uttered in all these days. Mother of Heaven, how you have power to move me with even a word. You do love me as ever, Beppo?"

"Have you had no proof of that? Or are your doubts of me so strong that they stifle all other feelings?"

"You have been so strange in your illness. So cold, so irresponsible, so unlike yourself. Ah, but my heart has been heavy with sorrow and dark like a northern night with the clouds of fear."

I passed my hand across my forehead and sighed. "Sometimes I do not understand myself. If I seem cold, blame my illness. But the dawn comes even after northern night, Molta."

"Pray Heaven it will, and soon, Beppo; for I am very

desolate." And with that she laid her head on my shoulder and burst into tears.

I let her weep. Any mood was more welcome than her endearments. But her tears were soon dried, and when she raised her head and dashed the tears from her eyes, I saw the light of wrath smouldering in them as she spoke of Masita.

"There would not be such danger were it not for Masita. Even Carlo believes she will accuse you of the deed, and has sought in vain to dissuade her," she cried, her eyes flashing angrily.

"She must do as she will, Molta."

"By the Virgin, she shall not. She shall never leave here alive unless she swears to hold her peace."

"And that she will not. She has taken a solemn vow to accuse me. And she is of the sort to keep her word."

"She will never have the chance. Carlo is as firm as I am on that."

"She is still on the island then?"

"Are we mad that we should let her go! You know why she was brought here."

I affected to try to remember. "I have forgotten," I said, with a sigh.

"My poor Beppo," she cried, leaning over me again and kissing me. "Is it really so with you? Would to Heaven I knew who had struck you that blow. If it was Vicino, as Breva declares, then I am glad at his death. If you had not slain him for it, I would. I swear that on my soul."

She looked quite capable of making her words good as she clenched her hand and flung up her arm.

I thought I saw how to turn her wrath to account. "But if he struck me down, as Breva says, how could I have slain

him, Molta?" If anyone could find out the truth about the man's death, surely she could.

She drew back and stared searchingly at me as a new light began to break in upon her thoughts. "But can you not remember what passed?"

"If even my love for you seems a strange thing, what else should I remember?"

"Do you mean that it does seem strange, Beppo?"

"I have told you I do not understand myself. All seems strange. It is as though there were a blank page in my life." I paused and sighed heavily. It was indeed no more and no less than the truth; and I had heavy cause for the sigh.

She sat for some moments with her fingers closely interlocked, her lips pursed, and her face frowning in thought. I gave a start as if a further idea had occurred to me. "There is another thing, Molta. If Vicino did not strike me down, whose hand could have done it?"

"Who were there?" she asked very sharply.

"I know not. Giuseppe, I believe, and Drako; and part of the time, Breva. But the lad loves me too well to do me an injury."

"Giuseppe." She almost hissed the name between her clenched teeth, and her eyes gleamed with fresh suspicion.

I saw that I had said enough. With a sigh of weariness I fell back on my pillow. "Ah, I am overtaxed, Molta. Leave me to sleep."

She sat on for a while, staring fixedly at me. Then she rose. "You have fired me with dangerous thoughts, Beppo," she said and went out of the room.

If I knew aught of a woman's nature, it would go hard with Giuseppe if she discovered that he had been the traitor in this business.

The next day I declared myself well enough to leave my bed, and passed the time in my chair by the window, observing what went on around. The window commanded a view of a large part of the island. I saw the people at work in the olive groves and in the fields and was surprised to find they were but few in number.

At noon they trooped up to the house for the midday meal and I counted them then. There were scarcely more than a dozen. Brevia was among them; and I was witness of a little love scene between him and Pepita. She ran out of the house just before he arrived and pretended to be so busy feeding some chickens, which had no need of food at such an hour, that she knew nothing of his coming. Her surprise at his stealthy approach was well acted, but it did not deceive him more than me; and in a trice the pair were away together out of sight of the house and of the rest of the folk, billing and cooing like a pair of turtle doves.

As Pepita returned toward the house, alone and with such an air of innocence, Masita met her. My heart gave a great leap at the sight of her. I feasted my eyes upon her radiant beauty and as I noted the sadness in her eyes and the pallor of her face, I renewed all the vows I had made before to help her, and comforted myself with the thought that my renewed strength and health would give me the power to do it if only my wits could find the means.

They spoke of me, I think, for Pepita pointed once to my window. I moved back quickly as Masita turned to glance up, but not so quickly that I failed to see the scorn in her face or miss the shudder with which she turned again and went on her way.

"She is very beautiful, eh, Beppo?" broke in the deep voice of Beltano at my elbow. "But she hates the very



mention of your name." He had entered the room while I had been absorbed in my thoughts of her.

"What does her hatred concern me?" I replied indifferently.

"Something, my good Beppo. Something, surely, for she holds to her vow to make you suffer for Vicino's death. Remember that; aye, remember it always."

"Why should she care so much for Vicino?"

"Was he not in some sort her kinsman? Are your wits still woolgathering?"

"I had forgotten it. But let her hate. In health and strength I am almost my old self again. What care I for a woman's hate."

"Yet I am sorry for it, man. I shall have a beautiful bride; but I would rather she had been friendly to my sister's husband."

"She will get over it," I said with a shrug. "You will tame her, Beltano."

He shook his head doubtfully. "She is a girl who feels strongly. I would with all my heart it had been otherwise."

"Then I will make her shed this silly prejudice. I shall be out to-morrow. I'll win her round or force her round. 'Tis all one to me."

"If you could do it, I should be glad," he answered slowly. "But not by the use of any force. You know not women and their ways. You don't draw a bolt by driving it under the surface with a sledge hammer."

"Leave the means to me; but let me have the opportunity."

"Oh, you shall have the opportunity," he answered, smiling and shaking his head. "But Vicino's death lies between you two, and until she is wedded to me and all our interests are one, that barrier will stand fast."

"Maybe," I replied with a shrug of feigned indifference.

But if the removal of the barrier had to wait until he forced Masita to marry him, it would never be removed, if I could prevent it—even if she persisted in making her threat against me good and my life were the forfeit.

I resolved to lose no more time. I had dallied too long already in my sick room, and the morrow should see the commencement of my task.

## CHAPTER VI

### MY CHANCE COMES

THE following day gave me another striking proof of Masita's feelings toward me.

When I went downstairs with Molta, the midday meal was in readiness, and Masita and Beltano were at the table. The instant she saw me she rose.

"I will not break bread with a murderer," she cried, her voice cold and cutting and instinct with loathing.

Molta fired on the instant. "Then you can sit with the other wenches," she retorted hotly.

Beltano found himself in an awkward dilemma between the two; unwilling to displease either, and yet at a loss with which to side. "Peace, Molta. Be careful what you say. Masita; remember that Beppo is affianced to Molta, and is my friend."

"I will take Molta at her word," she replied; and turned to leave the room.

"Stay. There is no need for this," I intervened. "I am not well enough to care for food just now;" and I pushed to the door and went out.

Beltano gave me a glance of thanks; and Molta followed me.

"You must go back, Molta," I said as we stood together outside.

"Do you think I will sit with her again after this? Shall I join in putting this insult upon you?"

"For Beltano's sake you must go back. Is she not to be

his wife? This quarrel is between her and myself. I will not have you two dragged into it. Do you suppose I cannot find means to deal with her myself? Am I a child to need a woman's protection?"

She continued to protest; but I insisted, and in the end I gained my way. She returned to the room.

I was glad to be thus left to myself. I wished to test my strength without being seen by the rest, and also to make a leisurely observation of my surroundings.

For the incident itself, I cared little. I knew that Masita hated the very sight of me; and one proof more or less didn't matter thirty cents. What did matter was that I should lose no time in forming some plan to help her out of her trouble. There would be no change in her distrust and hate until I did that.

As soon as I was well away from the little farmstead, I put my strength to the test, and was delighted to find that all was once again well with me. I could walk and run as swiftly as ever; and picking out a precipitous place in the cliffs which descended abruptly to the shore I climbed down and then scaled it with as steady a head as a man need care to have, and with little or no sign of fatigue.

Then I retraced my steps and walked down to the landing stage. It lay in a narrow gully between the limestone rocks and a couple of boats were moored to it; sails and oars being stored in a hut close by.

I made the closest observation of the place, noting every point of rock on the path to the beach, passing and repassing several times to familiarise myself with the way; so that at need I could traverse it in the dark.

Already the crude idea had formed in my thoughts that I should help Masita to escape to the mainland, stealing one of the boats for the purpose. For such a plan I must

know every inch of the path; as we should have to leave at night, and be able to get the boat out with the least possible loss of time.

I had spent several years in Italy in my younger days, and fortunately had had constant practice in sailing the boats which were used in those southern waters. The distance from the island to the nearest point of the mainland was not more than some seven miles; and I should have no difficulty in crossing if only the chance could be found or made.

From a hill not far from the gully in which the boats were moored I could see the mainland; and as I gazed across the stretch of water between I began to think out my plans.

Before I attempted the venture I must of course know where to land and learn something of the country beyond. This would not be difficult. I was still supposed to be a convalescent; and it would be natural enough for me to wish to go sailing and fishing.

Satisfied with the results of my first observations, I returned to the farmstead, and on the way down I met Brevia in company with another man, who glanced suspiciously at me, as if doubting how I should receive him, and then muttered something to the effect that he was glad to see me out again.

Intuitively I disliked this fellow; and when Brevia addressed him as Giuseppe I gave him a curt nod of recognition and a short word of reply.

"We began to think you were done for, Beppo," he said next. "It's a devil of a hornet's nest you've raised for us, too."

"You're not stung yet, are you?"

"Why should I be stung for what you did?"

"What was that?"

He laughed shortly and swore, as he rolled himself a fresh cigarette. "What should I mean but this business of Vicino?" he asked, after the pause.

I shrugged my shoulders. It was not my cue to let him know I had any suspicion of the part he had played. "You took care of your skin, Giuseppe. Those who run can afford to laugh."

"And why the devil shouldn't I run with the carabinieri close at my heels?" he retorted with an angry scowl.

"That's how all rabbits reason when they hear a noise."

Breva laughed at this and Giuseppe swore again. "You'll have to put a guard on that tongue of yours, Beppo," he said threateningly. "I hear you pretend to have forgotten all that passed that night; but others know all about it. What a man does he must answer for, I say. And so must you."

"I will, when the time comes," I replied and left them, as I saw Molta coming towards us.

"Where have you been, Beppo?" asked she anxiously.

"On the hill drinking in health and strength. The call of the sea is in my veins."

"Are you strong enough to manage your boat? Let us go together." One of the boats was mine; it seemed from this. But I did not ask.

"We had better have Breva," I replied. I had no wish to be alone with her more than was necessary.

She called him back. "Get Beppo's boat ready," she said; and while he was doing so told me what had passed in the house with Masita. There had been high words between them, and Beltano had lost his temper in trying to make peace.

"It is easily settled," I said. "I will stay no longer in the house."

"You mean you will go back to your hut?" she cried.

"That is just what I mean," I replied, hearing for the first time that I had a place of my own on the island. "I will make no trouble for either you or Beltano in this matter. It is settled," I declared bluntly.

Much to my surprise she made no demur, and contented herself with a muttered sentence to the effect that Masita should feel her anger. I concluded from this acquiescence that she had been accustomed to see that I would take my own line and that she must give way.

We went to the house then, as she declared that the place must be got ready for me; and when she had given the orders to Pepita, we all three went to the hut. This was fortunate, as I of course did not know even where it was.

Breva called us soon, saying the boat was ready; and we started for the sail. We made for the mainland; and I was thus able to make a careful observation of the place. We landed and I noticed the position of the farm, Solferino's, where Breva had told me the horses were kept; and as Molta and I strolled about, I succeeded in drawing a good deal of information from her as to the locality, the position of Masita's estate, the road to it and other matters.

On the return I sailed the boat myself, saying that I wished to test my strength, so that Molta and I might sail alone together the next time; and was gratified to find that I could manage quite well.

I did not see Masita again that day, nor the next; I passed most of my time on the sea, perfecting myself in the management of the felucca. All my old skill came back to me, and on the third day, assured that I needed no more practice, I was ready to face the other and more difficult part of my problem—how to overcome Masita's distrust and dislike.

I took possession of my hut and had my meals there alone, for Masita adhered to her refusal to suffer me in her presence.

Pepita brought me my meals, and on the third evening she lingered as if wishful to chat.

"You are much stronger, Beppo," she said.

"Thanks largely to you, Pepita. Brevia will have a good nurse in his little wife."

"But you think you are stronger than you really are," she replied without the bright smile which generally enlivened her words. She was a delightfully sunny little creature.

"Why that solemn face, child? Have those sharp eyes of yours seen aught about Brevia that vexes you?"

"Yes, my eyes are sharp, Beppo. Has your illness blinded yours so that you see nothing? Or is it as Giuseppe and Drako have it, that you have lost your senses so that you think she will not notice?"

"Who will not notice what?"

"Molta. If Brevia treated me so, do you think I should not see it? You no longer care for her, Beppo; but surely you are mad to show it so that others can see it. Brevia has noticed it, too."

"A man may care for a woman without being her slave, Pepita."

"Not before marriage, Beppo. At least that was not what you thought, or how you acted till a week ago. Does a man who cares for the woman show it best by avoiding her? Is coldness the proof of love? Is the averted cheek the lover's response to a caress? 'Tis but a short week since you were hanging on her slightest wishes, gazing into her eyes with rapture, seeking her at every moment, eager to find and loath to leave. Do you do this now?"



"You have been culling thistles from rose-bushes, Pepita."

"Take you care lest you cull the thorns when you are looking for the bud. I have eyes and can use them. You know Molta. You have changed toward her. I know not the reason nor your purpose. I do not seek to know them. But I warn you that when her eyes are opened—and there are many here only too willing to open them—you will pay the price. I heard Agapa speaking on the same theme only yesterday. We women can read the symptoms. Brevia bade me warn you. She is Drako's sister, and loves you better than he." And with that, looking more serious than I had ever seen her, she left me to my meal and the new thoughts she had started.

I had heard of Agapa, and only on the previous day had come across her in heated talk with Beltano. Brevia had told me that he had once made hot love to her, and that she was very curious about the reason for Masita's presence on the island. Drako was the firm ally of Giuseppe; and all three would gladly join in any scheme against me.

I was in the midst of these uncomfortable thoughts when Beltano came into my hut looking very uneasy.

"There is trouble, Beppo," he said at once. "Masita has just made an attempt to leave the island. I caught her myself. Someone had left one of the boats in readiness for use. With such a wind as is blowing now, she would have been unable to manage the boat and would have been lost."

"Who helped her?"

"They say it was you. I have given orders that no one is to use the boats without leave, and have had the sails and oars locked away."

"Who blames me?"

"Drako. 'Twas your boat she took."

"He lies, Beltano."

"I know it. You are not yet so tired of liberty that you would help her in her purpose of denouncing you. But there is treachery somewhere. And that at a moment when I have to leave the island."

"Why do you go then?" I asked indifferently; rejoicing in my heart at the good news.

"I must. I have had a call from the Count. There is great trouble about this matter of Vicino; and there are other reasons why he must see me at once. I shall be away some days. I would not care if she were already my wife. The Count tells me that there is a great chance at the moment. With Masita's fortune behind me, I can win the position which you know I have sought so eagerly."

"Marry her before you go, then," I said as I lighted a fresh cigarette.

"How can I without a priest? But it shall be done the moment I return. I am resolved on that."

"And Agapa?" I asked with a shrug.

He let out an oath at the mention of her name. "She is as dangerous as a wildcat. She will help Masita from the island if the chance offers, or do her harm. That is why I have come to you. You are strong again now. It is more to you than to anyone here that Masita should remain on the island; for her going will mean your ruin. You must answer for her in my absence."

I threw up my hands in genuine astonishment. I could scarcely believe in my good fortune. But I shook my head. "Look you to your own affairs, Beltano. This is none of mine. I am no gaoler; besides, she loathes the very sight of my face."

"It must be as I say, Beppo," he declared sternly. "You will guard her in my stead. Do as you will in

the matter; you will answer to me that she remains here and for her safety against trouble from the others."

I affected to consider. "It shall be as you say, Beltano," I replied as if yielding to his wishes.

I could not trust myself to say more, and averted my face lest he should see in it the delight at this chance to win over Masita which Fortune had flung into my lap at the very moment when I was all but despairing of even getting her to speak to me.

## CHAPTER VII

### GAOLER AND PRISONER

I SAT far into the night thinking how to make the best use of the unexpected good luck that had befallen me.

As a result I sought Beltano early in the morning. "I have rued," I declared. "Unless Masita is shut up somewhere I will not be answerable for her."

"Molta has been to you," he replied with an angry glance.

"No. But she will not bear my presence; how can I then dog her steps if she is at liberty? And how else can I assure myself that Agapa and the rest cannot harm her?"

"Molta's counsel is the same; but then I know her motive. She will not have you shut out from the house, and is full of spite against Masita."

I shrugged my shoulders. "You have my decision. It must be as I say, or you find someone else to guard her;" and I swung round to leave him.

"Stay, Beppo. You must do as you will. She shall keep her room in the house."

I shook my head. "Of what use that, when anyone can have access to her? There is but one place. The old fortress. Pepita can wait upon her there."

"You would make a prisoner of her," he protested.

"Would she not make a convict of me? Shall I be tender in the hand toward her?" I cried with a short laugh of anger.

As I spoke Masita herself appeared at the door of the farmstead.

"She must know that I am her gaoler, Beltano," I added. "Tell her now."

"To the devil with all the business," he exclaimed impatiently, as he went toward her. They spoke together for a few moments, Masita evidently protesting vigorously against what he said, and then I joined them.

"It must be as I say, Masita. There is no other course;" he was saying as I came within earshot.

"You have told her?" I asked bluntly, meeting her angry look with a scowl to the full as sullen and resentful. "I am to be your gaoler, you know."

She drew herself up to her full height and turned away.

"Stop," I said sternly as I put myself in her path. "I am tired of this. You will learn to do what I say."

"How dare you?" she cried, her eyes flashing defiance.

With a smile and gesture of impatience I folded my arms and blocked her way.

"Beltano," she appealed.

"I would order it otherwise if I could, Masita: but I can trust no other man but Beppo in this. And your safety is all in all to me."

"You hear," I said with a curl of the lip. "Come, I will show you where you are to remain."

"My prison, you mean?"

"Prison or shelter, call it what you like. Come."

At my harsh tone she clenched her hands, and her very body seemed to stiffen in resentment as if the devil himself should not have forced her to obey. Her glorious eyes flashed and her bosom rose and fell under the stress of her indignant breath.

"Come," I cried again; and this time I laid my hand on her arm. "I am no man to be fooled by a girl's whims."

At the touch of my hand she started and shuddered, like a colt that feels the lash for the first time. She wrenched her wrist from my grasp—I had only taken a light one—and stood trembling and agitated.

"Gently, Beppo," exclaimed Beltano.

I turned on him hotly. "Has she been gentle with me? Has she not threatened my life? Have I sought this task, or have you forced it on me? I take my own way, or you will find another for it—Giuseppe or Drako, or whom you will. If they can guard her life better than I, let them. But spare me your 'gently, Beppo.' If she will not obey, what is all this but foolery?"

"Masita," he said turning to her.

She still hesitated; the struggle fierce, rending and almost cruel. "I yield to you," she said then pointedly to him, turning her back on me.

I laughed. "You have yielded. That is enough," I declared; and I led the way to the old fortress of which I had spoken.

The island had at one time been the stronghold of a band of corsairs, and they had built themselves a small fortress on the edge of a jutting cliff. The site had been admirably chosen. The only approach to it was by a narrow, steep, and tortuous path hewn out of the rocks, while the precipitous cliff, dropping sheer and almost straight to the shore below, rendered approach from that side impossible, except at the risk of the climber's neck.

There were some half dozen rooms on the two floors of the place, and a smaller one above giving access to the roof, where a lookout had been constructed. A strong door,

heavily bolted and barred, guarded the entrance, and a couple of slits of windows cut in the thick walls on the land side enabled those within to guard against attack. Had I devised the place myself it could not better have served my purpose. It was at once a prison and a shelter, as I had told Masita.

She gave a little shudder of dread as she entered; but recovered her composure quickly and glanced curiously about the gloomy place. I judged that she was already calculating the chances of escape and was chilled to find how remote they were.

I led the way to the floor above where the rooms were brighter and the windows commanded a glorious view over the sea. The place was very dirty and covered with dust, but a little work would soon render them passably comfortable.

"You will remain here," I announced bluntly. "The place shall be cleaned at once and got ready."

She made no reply; gave no sign indeed that she had even heard me; and crossed to the window. The building was on the very brink of the precipice; and from where she stood she was unable to see even the narrow ribbon of a path which afforded a treacherous foothold some few feet below the window.

Her face clouded as involuntarily she caught her breath in dismay.

"It's a big jump, signorina," I said with a coarse chuckle.

Again she affected not to have heard me.

My brutal jibe was intended for Beltano, however; and it had the effect I wished, for he turned angrily upon me to protest; but I shrugged my shoulders and swung away, leaving him to say what he would to Masita.

I returned to the farmstead and told Molta the arrangements I had made and that some of the women must be sent to the old fortress at once to have it ready for Masita before Beltano left the island.

She was delighted with the plan. "You have done right, Beppo. I had thought of keeping her in her room here; but this is better;" and she gave the necessary orders at once.

She was for leaving the rooms all but bare of furniture. "It is a prison; let it be one," she declared vindictively. "She deserves no less for her treatment of you."

"She is to be Beltano's wife, Molta," I replied. That pretext served to obtain for Masita such furniture as was available; and I myself carried over many things I judged she would need.

At this Molta took umbrage, sneering jealously at my care and thought for Masita, but I pleaded Beltano's wishes and so gained my end.

Pepita read my motive, however; and once when we were alone spoke to me. "You are surely mad, Beppo. All the women on the island will know why you do this."

"She is to be the wife of our leader. Ask Beltano if I have done too much."

She threw up her hands. "There will be trouble from it," she cried.

"The trouble will be Masita's. Should aught come to me, I will deal with it."

"You are mad," she repeated. "She has bewitched you."

"See to it that she does not bewitch you. You will attend upon her," I replied.

"I would rather some other had the task."

"Shall I give it to Agapa?"



"The Holy Virgin forefend," she exclaimed with a shudder.

"We both understand. Now listen to what I say. I am taking no risks in this matter. At night I shall be on guard outside; but you must be as watchful as a cat within. You will not close your eyes during the dark, but watch incessantly; and at the slightest sound to rouse suspicion, you will call to me. You can sleep from the dawn, and when chance offers in the day also. Brevia will watch in the daytime when I sleep."

At noon I sought out Brevia and told him. The lad loved me, I think, and readily agreed to do all I wished. But he and Pepita had talked much together of Masita and the change in me, and he could not now restrain his curiosity.

"You have some secret purpose, Beppo. You will trust me? My life is yours."

"When the time comes I will tell you. Have patience."

Soon after midday Beltano left, having first seen Masita installed in her new quarters. As he came out, I was at the spot I had selected for my sentinel work. I told him the arrangements I had made and that I wished him to repeat them to Molta.

"She is mad against Masita for her treatment of me and may think that I am doing too much," I said. "Tell her it is all done by your orders."

"I have thought it over. You are right," he answered. "I know now that Agapa's heart is full of wrath. I was to have wedded her, and you know what a Greek is. If trouble should arise, deal with it as you will. You are in my place in this. And remember, I trust to you," he said as he held out his hand.

I felt something of a traitor as I gave him mine; but Masita's welfare was above all in my eyes, and I dared not

show a sign to him of what was in my heart. He departed without a suspicion, and an hour or two later I went to Masita.

The two rooms assigned to her use had been thoroughly cleaned; they were bright and cheerful with the sunlight, and made by no means uncomfortable quarters.

She was sitting buried in thought, and as I entered glanced at me and then dropped her eyes as if to resume the broken thread of her thought. She affected to ignore my presence.

But I had to rouse her interest; and to do this began first to play upon her curiosity. I knew that only one line was possible with her, and that I could only look to prevail by strong measures. She would never yield except to a stronger will.

I stood a moment glancing about me as if assuring myself that all had been done as I had directed; and then moving to a spot directly behind her, I stood as still as a statue staring straight at her; concentrating all my will to force her to turn and look at me.

Whether she guessed my purpose I cannot say; but minute after minute passed without a sign that she even knew I was still in the room. The window was open, and through it came the sound of the lapping of the waves on the seashore far below; the only sound to break the dead silence.

Presently I observed slight signs of uneasiness. First her shoulders moved uneasily. Then the hand on which her face rested began to tremble as the muscles tightened. Her breath deepened and quickened, growing tremulous and agitated. And all the time I stood like a stone figure, controlling even my breathing that she should not hear it.

As the time passed the strain upon her intensified. Many

signs were manifest now that the ordeal was testing her self-control to the uttermost. And then all suddenly the end came. She sprang up and turned at bay, her face pale and her lips quivering, and her eyes aflame with anger.

"You coward!" she cried.

I made no reply; standing stock still, as if I had not heard her speak; and continued to stare sternly straight into her eyes.

Again she took up the challenge of my gaze, facing me at first in hot anger, then in curious doubt of my purpose, gradually with a dawning fear, and at last almost reluctantly and with quickly mounting effort, forcing herself to maintain a contest in which she now felt she must fail.

At length her eyes fell; and with a cry she hid her face in her hands, and threw herself back into the chair.

Still I made no sign nor movement. I was resolved that she should speak to me in obedience to my stronger will.

The struggle now was much shorter. Scarcely a minute passed before she grew restless again and turned to me.

"What is your will? Would you saturate me with fear of you?" Her voice was low and halting despite her effort to appear firm.

"You need not fear me. But you have forgotten the pledge I gave you on the night of Vicino's death, or you believe I shall not keep it. I have done this to force you to recall it."

I stayed just long enough to see that she searched her memory for the clue to my meaning, and then I left the room.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A HAZARDOUS ADVENTURE

CONFIDENT that I had succeeded in rousing Masita's curiosity and that if left alone she would plague herself with doubts as to the meaning of my strange conduct, I ordered Pepita not to go to her again until the following morning.

Locking the door of the fortress I went back to the farmstead, as I had promised Molta that I would return there for the evening meal. I was late and found her in an ill temper.

She questioned me about Masita; and from time to time the sharp glances she cast at me and the trend of her almost suspicious questions led me to conclude that, as Pepita had told me, someone had been trying to open her eyes to the reason of the change in me.

"You seem very anxious for her comfort, Beppo," she said. "Why do you take all this trouble?"

"Did not Beltano tell you the arrangements he had ordered?"

"Not that you were to loiter all the day close to her and leave me to myself," she replied acidly.

"Breva is to watch during the day, not I."

"That is not answering me, Beppo, nor explaining why you have kept me waiting now while you were with her. You know that and know what I mean?"

"I am not so sure that I do know what you mean," I

replied, meeting her angry glance steadily. "What is in your thoughts?"

Her eyes dropped and she forced a laugh. "Why do you stare at me like that? You are so altered. You never used to treat me like this. I used to be first in your thoughts."

I burst into a loud laugh, and snatching her hand kissed it. "By the keys of heaven, if I don't believe you're jealous," I cried.

She snatched her hand away. "You had better not give me reason to be," she cried meaningly.

I resolved to have the truth out of her, so I affected to be angry. "Be careful what you say. Since my hurt, my temper is shorter than it used to be; and threats, whether from man or woman, rouse it. This gaolership is of Beltano's ordering. Am I to tie myself to your skirts rather than do his bidding?"

"He did not bid you take a pleasure in leaving me alone to be at the beck and call of Masita."

"You tire me with your foolishness," I exclaimed impatiently.

A hot reply sprang to her lips, but she checked it and, sitting down to the table, busied herself nervously with the meal for a space. Then she looked at me steadily. "We must understand one another better, Beppo. You have never spoken like that to me before. If I tire you, or rather, if you have tired of me, say so."

"Still threatening?" I replied, reading the angry light in her eyes.

"What others see I may begin to see. And then I may only threaten, but——" She left me to finish the sentence as I would.

Pepita was right. She had been listening to the rest. I

made no reply, save that the cloud on my face deepened. For some moments we were silent.

"There is news from the mainland. The men who went with Carlo brought it."

I took no notice, continuing to eat in silence.

"The fact that you killed Signor Vicino is known and a price has been set on your head."

I dashed my knife down on the table and rose. "In Heaven's name have done with it," I cried furiously. "I am no fool to misread your meaning; nor a child to be frightened by your threats. If your will is to hand me to the carabinieri, send for them and do it. But spare me your silly taunts prompted by an empty jealousy. If you would turn the feeling I have for you to hate, you can take no quicker or surer road. I am no dog to be held in a leash and menaced with the lash."

I was hurrying out when she ran and put herself in my way. "I didn't mean to anger you like this, Beppo."

"Mean it or not, you have done it," I answered curtly.

"You know I would never do aught against you. You know that."

"Then why threaten me?"

"You are so strange to me. So different. So cold;" and she made as if to put her arms about my neck.

I stepped back. "No. You have angered me. I know your thoughts. You would be my master and have me cringe and whine before your lifted finger. I am not fashioned that way. You listen to tales against me when my back is turned; and in your senseless anger at what is told you raise the whip. You say there is a price on my head. Well, earn it by betraying me; and find some other man to fawn upon your whims and answer your threats with ca-

resses," and slipping past her I went out and returned to the old fort for my night's vigil.

I found Brevia awaiting me. He also had heard the news that I had been proscribed.

"It is Giuseppe's doing, Beppo, I am sure. He is one of the few of us who know that Vicino is dead, and he has been secretly to the mainland."

"It will neither help him nor hurt me," I replied. "The carabinieri will not come here, and I shall not go there; and in a few days there will be changes, and Vicino's friends will no longer be in power."

Beltano had assured me of this, and the Count's urgent summons had had to do with the matter. But the knowledge that I was a proscribed murderer, even though the deed had been committed while I could not be held accountable for my acts, was infinitely distressing. I thought of it constantly in the long hours of my watch that night; and the fact that I had been unable to ascertain whether or not it had been my hand which had slain the man—galled and harassed me. I must lose no time in getting at the truth.

And the next day the matter had other consequences. Brevia relieved me of my watch soon after dawn, and when at midday I returned to the fort, Pepita surprised me by saying Masita wished to speak to me.

Here was a change indeed. I went up to her with a smile of exultation; but her first words killed it. "I have sent for you, not because I have ceased to loathe your presence, but because you are my gaoler," she said, with as much contempt as she could cram into both words and manner.

"Call it gaoler or guardian, as you please. Names are as nothing."

"How long am I to be a prisoner?"

"Beltano said he should be absent at least some days."

I thought I could detect signs that she understood this intentionally equivocal answer, for she paused a second before replying. "And am I to remain shut up here all that time?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Those are his orders," I said bluntly.

"In that case I must have some few things from my house," she said, again showing some hesitation.

"Give me a list of them and they shall be fetched."

"I have written it;" and she handed me a paper.

I glanced down the list. There was nothing in it of any consequence; nothing that she could not very well have done without. The thought at once occurred to me that, after my conduct of the day before she had been recalling my words—that I would help her—and intended this more as a test than anything else.

"Say to whom this paper is to be given and add an authority to the bearer to receive them."

"May I say where I am?" she asked as she took back the paper.

"No. That would bring trouble upon others than myself."

She started ever so slightly at this reply and then wrote as I said. "You can read all I have written," she said as she gave it me again.

I turned to leave the room and she stopped me. "There is another thing. I wish to have my brother know that I am here." She saw my hesitation and added, "You know well why he may safely be told."

"On the contrary, I do not."

"The girl, Agapa," she replied with a wealth of scorn.

The answer astonished me. "I will see what can be done," I said; and again turned to leave.



As my fingers were on the handle of the door she again stopped me. "Wait. What did you mean by your conduct yesterday?"

I paused, returning her steady, searching look. Then I held up the paper. "I will do all this if I can," and with that I closed the door behind me.

I was convinced now that she had been pondering my words, and that the request she had made was intended to be no more than a test of my readiness to keep my pledge. How gladly I welcomed it may be imagined.

As I left, I questioned Brevia about her brother. His name was Julius, I found, and the reason why he could be safely told of her whereabouts was that he was in Beltano's power and was deeply in love with Agapa. "But she is only fooling him," he added.

I told Molta of Masita's request, and said that someone should be sent to fetch what was wanted. I had not seen her since the dispute of the previous evening; and the fact that my first words were about Masita so angered her that she took the paper and tore it to shreds, declaring that no one should be sent on such a fool's errand.

"As you will," I replied. "But Beltano will be angered." Her only reply was a laugh of indifference.

I decided therefore that I would go myself; and returning to the fort, I sent Pepita to obtain a second list and authority, and told Brevia what I should do. He warned me almost passionately against any such course. If I were to be caught by the carabinieri, all would be lost, he declared, and offering to go in my place. But I knew that if he went the anger which Molta would hesitate to vent upon me would certainly be visited upon him.

I had little fear of being caught. I had found in my hut a suit of clothes much less outlandish than that which

I was wearing; and dressed in them I could at need assume my own nationality.

I bade Breva hold his tongue about my trip. If my absence was noticed he was merely to say I had gone fishing; and as soon as I received the fresh paper from Masita I set off.

I was indeed glad it had fallen out that I should go myself. It would prove that my expressed desire to serve her was not mere talk; and if I succeeded, I reckoned that it would do more than a week of talking to make her trust me.

It was late in the afternoon before I started, and a contrary wind delayed my passage. Thus the dusk was beginning to fall when I reached Solferino's farm and obtained a horse. I was evidently well known there; and an indirect question or two as to which was the nearest road to Masita's house, brought me the information I needed as to my route.

I had no difficulty in finding the place and on presenting her letter, the little packet was soon ready.

But the message to her brother, Julius, was a different matter. He was not at the house, and I was told that I should probably find him at one of the taverns in the little town of Levaccio, some two or three miles distant.

This was not so much to my liking. It was not at all improbable that I had been to the places and might be recognised. Still there was no help for it, and I accordingly turned my horse's head in the direction and set off at a smart pace.

On consideration I decided to make the search for him on foot; and leaving my horse fastened in a copse outside the town, assumed a casual air and strolled up the main street, keeping a wary eye for signs of the carabinieri.

I sauntered into the first place which had been mentioned

to me and finding it all but empty, called for some wine and asked the man who served me if Julius Correggio had been there.

The sound of my voice brought a woman out: a comfortable, homely-looking body, who gave me a sharp glance, murmured a good-evening, and sent away the man. Then she came close to me and with a gesture of caution, whispered; "Why are you here, Beppo? The town is full of the carabinieri looking for you."

"I must have word with Julius Correggio at once."

"As ever, the most reckless fool of all," she cried, throwing up her hands as if amazed at my foolhardiness. "Stay here, I will send for him. Sit over there. Be drunk or anything you will, lest the police come."

She hurried away and I took my wine to one of the small tables and sat down feeling, it must be confessed, profoundly uncomfortable at her news. I was anxious to do the service for Masita; but not at the cost of falling into the hands of the police.

Some minutes passed; anxious minutes they were, too, as I sat listening to every sound in the street; and presently she came bustling back, looking pale and troubled. "They are coming here," she said. "Come, and I'll try to hide you."

I rose; but it was too late. The men were already at the door.

I sat down again. "Leave it to me," I whispered. "Mind, you do not know me. I am an American and have been asking you where I can get a bed to-night." Then I raised my voice and began to talk in broken Italian with a nasal accent sharp enough to sour the wine, breaking in with scraps of exaggerated Yankee.

We were laughing together, as if she utterly failed to understand me, when three men in the uniform of the carabinieri pushed their way in noisily.

It was a pretty situation. They all eyed me very sharply, and if either of them had seen me before, my arrest on the charge of murder was no more than a matter of moments.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CARABINIERI

WHEN the police thrust their way in, I knew that much would turn upon the first impression I created. I managed to keep my head. Giving a start of surprise, I returned the stare with which they all favoured me and muttered as if to myself but in a tone loud enough to reach them: "Who in thunder are these?"

The woman of the place bade them good-evening, and before the leader who stepped forward could get a word out, I addressed myself to him.

"Good-evening, signor, you'll pardon me I hope," I said, speaking with the most nasal drawl I could command and sticking my thumbs in the armholes of my waistcoat, in the fashion approved of by all caricaturists of the American abroad; "but if either of you gentlemen can speak English, I'll take this meeting as just the cleanest bit of luck I've struck for some time. For I'm up against it, good and hard, with this good soul here. I want a lodging and she just insists on thinking I ought to fill myself up with her wine."

The frown with which he listened to my first words faded gradually, and, when I had finished, he smiled, and to my intense satisfaction replied in English, which he spoke fluently. "Excuse me one minute, sir, and I shall place myself at your service."

"Bully for you," I exclaimed with the broadest of grins, and seized his hand and wrung it cordially.

His two companions smiled, and he turned to the woman

and held a whispered conversation in the course of which I heard the name of Beppo Serrano mentioned several times by them both.

I sipped my wine and puffed at my cigarette, smiling carelessly with the air of a man unexpectedly helped out of a difficulty; but thinking hard over the tale I had best tell to account for my presence.

"Now, sir," he said at length, turning to me.

"Some wine, the best," I said to the woman, in broken Italian. "You'll all drink with me to our better acquaintance?" I added to the officer.

He made me a pretty bow. "What is your trouble?" he asked, as we sat down.

"A pile of it. I'm an American; Cunningham's my name, of New York, a newspaper man, on the prowl for copy. Got a cable when I was in Rome on a vacation to come down here to write up something about some new sulphur mines said to have been found in this province. At Palermo they told me to come to this place. Just in; and can't make a soul understand my Italian. Guess the New York folk thought a fortnight in Rome ought to make me speak the language all right. I know something about sulphur, but as for the language——" I tossed up my hands with a laugh.

"I have been in New York," he said, smiling.

"Gee-wiz! You don't say," I exclaimed, gripping his hand again.

"My name is Murito. I am an officer in the carabinieri."

"Well, Captain, I'm just real glad to meet you, and if ever you come to New York again and I'm there, I'll give you the time of your life," and as the wine was set before us, I filled the glasses and we clinked them together in good fellowship.

"I cannot give you much time now, I am on duty. How can I serve you?"

"Tell this good creature that I want a bed here for a day or two and that as she refuses to understand my Italian, she must get me such food as she likes."

He laughed, and turning to the woman acted as interpreter. She was a shrewd body, and laughed and gestured and apologised for her supposed mistakes with a very natural air, and with a promise to do all she could to make me comfortable, hurried off to give the necessary orders.

Then I put a question or two about the sulphur mines, and he assured me that there were none within many miles of Levaccio. I persisted, however, that my people would not be likely to have made a mistake.

"There was a man who could have told you if there is such a thing, Signor Vicino, but unfortunately he is dead. He has been murdered, we fear; and it is to look for the assassin, a ruffian named Beppo Serrano, that I now am engaged," he said. "One of a dangerous band."

"Is there a good newspaper story in it?" I asked quickly. "As a matter of fact, I may tell you, I have been urged to look into the brigandage question," I added, lowering my voice and speaking with a confidential air.

"Oh, no, there is nothing of that. Nothing at all. We have no brigandage here," he replied emphatically. His wish to assure me on the point was very evident.

"More's the pity from my point of view. We have our own toughs and bad men on our side, of course, but our readers like something more picturesque."

"Oh, no, there is nothing of the kind here. We have put it all down with a strong hand, I assure you."

"And about the sulphur? Levaccio was the place told to me."

He reflected a moment and then burst out into a loud laugh. "Of course," he said. "I see it now. You have come to the wrong place. There is another Levaccio. It is in Catanisetta. There is sulphur all round there."

I fell back in my chair as if overwhelmed with astonishment. "Gee wiz, but I've run up against a snag," I exclaimed.

"I know that saying," he said. "Run up against a snag. I remember it. I think you have," and he laughed good-humouredly.

"Well, it's up to me to make good somehow. How had I better fix it?"

"Ride over to Trapani; the railway from there will take you to the district."

"It's a pretty how-d'ye-do, anyway," I said with a laugh and a shrug.

He rose then. "I should say I am very sorry were it not that your mistake has given me the pleasure of meeting you. I have many friends in New York and I like all Americans I have met."

At the same moment the woman came back into the room and shot me a glance of warning.

I gave him my hand. "If ever you come to my country again, Captain, ask for me at the Press Club. Shake!"

I went outside with him and a young fellow passed us as I stood while he mounted. He bore a resemblance to Masita, and it was an easy guess that it was her brother. Fortunately my face was in the shadow and seeing me with the police, he did not look closely at me.

Just as the officer was riding off he said, "I can make some enquiries to-night about the sulphur and I will call and see you in the morning."



"That's real friendly of you," I replied and waved my hand in a last farewell as he departed.

I let the party get well away before I re-entered the house. The young fellow was talking to the woman and turned as I entered.

"Beppo! You?" he exclaimed, his weak dissipated face alight with astonishment that I should have been with the carabinieri.

I drew him aside out of the woman's hearing. "I have a message for you. Masita is on the island and wishes you to go to her at once. You are not to breathe a word of where she is or—well, you know," and I left him to draw his own conclusion as to the consequences.

"Of course I'll come," he said after a moment's pause; "to-morrow, probably."

"Give me a line saying so."

"Do you know that the police——"

"Write what I need," I broke in impatiently.

While he wrote it I thanked the woman of the house for her service. "Tell Captain Murito, when he comes in the morning, that I left to-night for Trapani."

She was full of curiosity as to what had passed and began to pour out a volume of questions; but I did not satisfy her, pleading that my time was up; and taking the paper from Julius I left the house.

If I was to get back to the island safely I felt that I had not a moment to lose. It was almost certain that the carabinieri were out in some force on the hunt for me; and although the tale I had told had sufficed to mislead them when I was in the wine shop, it would be altogether too thin to be believed if I should be caught riding alone in the dark.

That the story of my proscription was correct, I had had abundant proof; and unless I was to make a bolt clean out of the country, my only safe place was on the island. I must trust that Beltano would be able to make his words good—that his friends would get into power and the hunt for me be abandoned.

I have no hesitation in saying that I felt profoundly ill at ease as I turned into the now deserted street and hurried off to the spot where I had left my horse. I was suspicious of every dark spot; and when once or twice a loiterer passed me, I held myself in readiness for trouble.

When I was once more in the saddle I breathed more easily. I started at a leisurely pace, feeling that I had better spare my horse all I could so that he should be as fresh as possible if I were pursued. I reckoned that I had quite ten miles to cover before reaching Solferino's; and any moment might find the police at my heels.

Fortunately the road was easy. I had carefully observed every turn and twist, and had noted certain landmarks to guide me on my return ride. I had thus but little difficulty in finding my way; and when I had ridden some half of the distance I began to hope that I should get through without trouble. This confidence strengthened with every yard, and I was breathing my horse up a slight hill, when I heard horses' hoofs ahead and the jangle of accoutrements.

By good fortune there were some bushes by the side of the road and I dismounted and led my horse behind them. I stood by his head stroking him gently, as the men came riding leisurely in my direction.

It was a police patrol sure enough. I caught a fragment or two of their talk. I heard the name of Serrano, uttered

with curses at their luck in having to search for me; and a reference to information having been given that I was in the district.

As they came nearer, my horse began to grow restless; and I expected every instant that he would neigh to the other animals and so betray my presence. I laid my cheek to his nose to quiet him; holding my own breath as the men came opposite to the spot where I stood, paused while one of them lighted a cigarette, and then passed.

But they were not a hundred yards down the hill before my horse drew his head from my grasp and snorted loudly.

"What was that?" I heard one of them ask.

I did not wait for any more. In a second I was in the saddle and made off up the hill at a gallop.

A voice called to me to stop, and when I took no notice, a couple of shots were fired and the men turned and came thundering in pursuit. It was a stern chase; but I held them easily and at first increased the distance between us. But my animal was not of much account and, although faster than theirs, had no staying power; and when I was about a mile from Solferino's, I found to my dismay that his strength was giving out and that my pursuers were making up fast upon me.

I had no spurs, and although I dug my heels almost viciously into his sides, I could not get any better speed out of him.

I began to give up hope. Even if I could succeed in keeping ahead of the patrol to Solferino's, they would be too close upon my heels to make it possible for me to get to the boat before they caught me. I recalled, too, that they had spoken of having had information of my movements; and with something like a touch of panic, I reflected that in all probability they knew the place for

which I was making and would have left someone there to intercept me.

Then a plan occurred to me. I remembered that the road by which we had approached Solferino's on the night of Vicino's death branched away to the left. Urging my horse to a last effort, I spurted forward and, when I came to it, I sprang to the ground, sent him galloping on, and lay down on the ground. On reaching the turning, my pursuers drew rein to listen and then spurred after my horse.

The instant they had passed I ran at top speed in the direction of the beach. If the ruse succeeded I could get to the boat and be off before they could overtake me; and I strained every effort in the race.

I slowed down as I reached Solferino's house, and crept past it stealthily, lest a guard should be waiting for me there. But all was dark and silent; and I quickened up again and descended the path to the beach as quickly as safety allowed.

"Who goes there?" came a voice out of the darkness; and led by the sound I saw a man standing on the landing stage, by the side of the felucca.

"Captain Murito," I replied instantly, imitating the officer's tone as best I could. "Have you seen anything?"

"Nothing, Captain."

Almost as he spoke, the report of some guns rang out, loud and sharp in the still night; and listening intently I heard the sound of horses' hoofs approaching at the gallop.

The luck had turned with a vengeance.

I was caught like a rat in a corner.

## CHAPTER X

### JEALOUSY

For a breathless second after hearing the report of the guns I was at my wits' end. Then it occurred to me that as the figure of the man by the boat was outlined against the water I could probably see him much more plainly than he could see me, since I was close to the dark limestone rock.

"I told them to fire if they got him. I expect that is the signal," I said. "We'll go up to them. Come."

With the instinctive obedience of his training he started, but after half a dozen steps halted. "My orders were to stay by the boat whatever happened, Captain."

"I'll stay here," I replied.

But either the order or something in my tone roused his suspicious. He drew back a step and I saw him bringing his carbine to the present.

I didn't give him time to get it to his shoulder, however. Picking up a heavy stone I flung it straight at his face and before he could recover from the surprise of the blow, I rushed at him and thrust him into the sea.

The water was only shallow; but he went in backwards, letting out a loud yell as he splashed in; and before he had regained his feet I cast off the boat and punted it out until I could get the oars to work.

I was some thirty yards or so from the landing stage when the others came clattering down the path and over the beach shouting and calling like a pack of monkeys.

Every second was carrying me farther away from them as I tugged and strained at the oars with all the strength I possessed. But as soon as they had heard from their soused companion that I had escaped in the boat, some of them began to fire after me, while I heard others rushing about the beach in search of another craft.

I had to run the risk of their hitting me until I could get the sail set; and then with the sheet in my hand, I lay down under cover of the bulwarks. There was a good steady breeze, and as soon as I was clear of the cove the little boat ripped through the water at a speed which soon carried me out of range.

With a sigh of intense relief at my escape, I rolled a cigarette, glanced astern to make sure that no boat was following me, and leant back, realising for the first time how close a call it had really been. A slight hitch in the luck, and I should have been in gaol, or what would have been almost as bad, a fugitive on the island with a price on my head.

When once I reached the island I would stay there, I resolved, until Beltano was able to assure me that it was safe to leave; or until I had probed the mystery of Vicino's death.

As there was no signal light to guide me, I had some little difficulty in finding the landing stage on the island; but this did not delay me long; and after I had stored the sails and oars, I went up to the old fort to relieve Brevia of his watch.

He was intensely glad to see me, but had bad news.

"There has been the devil to pay about your absence, Beppo. Drako found out about it—he must have spied on you, I think; and he and Giuseppe crossed about an hour after you had left. They were about an hour on the

mainland; and after their return, Molta came to me with a hundred questions about your going and all the rest of it. But I held my tongue. She was in a fine rage, however."

I told him briefly what had occurred and sent him to rest. "Go and sleep, Breva. I'll deal with the thing in the morning. Let them question me."

The reason for the action of the carabinieri was now clear. Giuseppe had by some means succeeded in setting them on my track; and it was to that I owed the narrow squeak I had had at the last moment.

Why was the man so bent on my capture? Had Breva been right in his surmise that all that scene on the night of Vicino's death had been planned to secure my arrest on the charge of murder? Had it been by him that I had been struck down? If so, who had killed Vicino?

If Vicino himself had struck me, then, as I had said to Molta, it was a sheer impossibility that I could have killed him afterwards. Yet if I had killed him, who had struck me afterwards, and why?

The only answer to these perplexing questions all fitted with the theory that Giuseppe himself, or Drako, his firm friend and ally, had attacked me. It was possible, of course, that I had killed Vicino and that the two had afterwards rendered me unconscious so that I should fall into the hands of the police.

But against that there was the fact that Beltano's orders had been clear and definite—that Vicino should be captured, not killed; and Beltano himself had admitted that I was not likely to go counter to his order.

The more I thought round the thing the more certain became my conviction that Giuseppe or his ally had done the ill deed, and finding that I had no recollection of what

had passed had put it all on me. But how to discover the truth and secure the proof of it baffled me.

I went over the ground again and again many times; but without seeing any means of obtaining this proof. Molta could perhaps get it; but to trust to her involved the continuance of this hypocritical business of lovemaking—a positively detestable prospect.

All through the hours of my watch that night I chewed the problem; harassed by the difficulties and maddened by the thought that until the proof was in my hands, I must remain in Masita's eyes an assassin. It had become my one consuming desire to clear myself to her; to quench the light of alternate fear and loathing with which she looked upon me, and implant in its place those signs of trust and confidence for which my heart was hungering.

When Brevia returned in the morning I gave him the little packet I had brought from Masita's house and the letter from her brother, saying that Pepita was to hand them to Masita without a hint that I had fetched them.

A few hours' sleep refreshed me and by noon I was at the farmstead. Molta met me with black looks; and I observed that Agapa had taken Pepita's place in the house.

Molta let me proceed with my meal in silence for a time and then said, "You were away from the island yesterday, Beppo?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"Why did you go and where?"

"Beltano would have wished it. You refused Masita's request. I complied with it."

"Who rules here in Carlo's place?"

"No one rules me, Molta. Don't be unreasonable."

"I would not believe it when they told me," she burst out angrily. "Has that woman bewitched you?"



"Ah, you have been listening to Agapa again. I see you have her in the house now in Pepita's place. You are always trying to quarrel with me since you began to heed her gossip."

"It is you who make the cause for quarrelling, Beppo. You think you can treat me as you please. You cannot. You shall not. What did you do yesterday on the mainland?"

"You saw the list of things Masita needed. I fetched them; and found that young fool, Julius, and told him his sister wished him to come here."

"That was not all. You are trying to blind my eyes. Whom else did you see?"

I smiled. "Some of the carabinieri. I had a long talk with their captain, a man named Murito."

"You admit it then. You went to seek their help for that woman. They told me as much. I could not believe it. You went to betray us."

"Ah, your anger dulls your wits, Molta," I replied impatiently. "Someone sought to betray me. News was given to these police that I was over there and only by a hairsbreadth I escaped capture. I suspect Giuseppe and Drako. But the thing failed and here I am again."

"I don't believe you."

I rose. "You mean that I am lying?" I asked coldly.

"I mean that that woman has bewitched you and set you against me and against all of us."

"Then I am not fit to be in your presence, Molta," and I turned to leave.

"Don't dare to go like that, Beppo," she cried furiously, her face paled and set and her lips pressed tightly together in passion.

I threw her a glance and went out, slamming the door behind me. I caught a glimpse of a woman's skirts disappearing out of the house, and saw Agapa running in the direction of the men's huts. I guessed she had been listening.

She stayed only a few seconds in one of the huts and met me as I passed.

She greeted me with a smile. "Good-morning, Beppo. You were away yesterday?"

"With a result that should please you, Agapa."

"Tell me."

"Julius is coming to the island to-day."

She was a handsome girl, but at times she would part her lips, while her white teeth were shut, in a sort of snarl which greatly disfigured her. She did it now at my news. "Did you tell him it was I who wished him to come? I gave you no message."

"Don't you want him?"

"It was at Masita's bidding you went, Beppo." At the mention of Masita her eyes hardened.

"Don't meddle with matters that are nothing to you, Agapa."

"It is my matter. You know that, as all on the island know. Why do you let this woman come between us all in this way? You know what I mean well. Have not you and Molta quarrelled because of her? Was it not well enough with us until she came? What is she to you or to Beltano that you should let her make this trouble? Am I not a woman as fair as she, and shall I suffer myself to be tossed aside like a withered olive that she may take the place which is mine by right?"

"Do what you will. It is none of my affairs," I replied curtly to provoke her to plainer speech.

She grasped my arm and looked searchingly into my face.

"Is it true, then, that she has changed you? Have you forgotten your pledge, when I sought to win my brother to your side at the time of your quarrel with Giuseppe—that you would help to hold Beltano to keep his faith to me? Or are you like other men, eager for a woman's help in the time of need and ready to cast her aside when the help is no longer wanted?"

I knew nothing of what she spoke, of course; but did not admit it. "Have you ever found me false to my word, 'Agapa?'"

"Then I call on you to keep it now. Listen to me. Beltano has brought Masita here to make her his wife. She is held by force by you. Let her escape. She would gladly fly. You know that. Let her go, I say. For I swear to Heaven she will never live to be Beltano's wife in my place."

"I have passed my word to Beltano to keep her here till he returns."

"And do you fear Beltano's anger so much? Have you turned coward, too, under her influence? And do you think he would seek to harm you with Molta on your side? You know how she would rejoice at Masita's going. If you care for her, you will do what I say."

"I have not turned craven, Agapa," I replied after a pause in which I affected to think over her words. "You say you would help me?"

"If you need help, yes. But the thing is easily done if you consent. Set her free and Drako will take her safely across the mainland."

"There is Julius," I reminded her, thinking of her love passages with him.

She mistook the reference. "Yes, that would be better. He could take her and we could say that he contrived the escape."

"I mean that you will have to reckon with him for your broken pledges."

"Ah, what does he matter?" she cried contemptuously. "I can do with him what I will, and if my brother but lifts a finger, his little soul quivers with fear."

You have made him love you and——"

"Was it not at Beltano's bidding that we might bind him the closer to us?" she interrupted fiercely. "And was not Beltano fooling me even as I have fooled Julius? You will do what I wish? You must. You pledged me your word."

"I will think of it. Remember that Masita has sworn to accuse me of Vicino's death the moment she is free."

"Do this for me, Beppo, and even that shall——" She broke off suddenly and hesitated a second. "Do this for me and you shall have ample proof of my friendship," she substituted.

"I will think of it," I said again; and left her.

I was convinced that she knew what I so yearned to know—the secret of Vicino's death; and whether she had checked herself from the fear of saying too much or because of a look she had read in my eyes I could not tell.

But her words served to ease the intolerable burden of fear that my hands were really stained with Vicino's blood; and my heart was lighter than for days past.

The circle was narrowing round the real assassins, and the hour of my deliverance coming nearer.

This thought was in my mind as I went on to the old fort to see Masita.

## CHAPTER XI

"ARE YOU GAOLER OR SPY?"

I WAS conscious of a new feeling of elation now as I thought of Masita. I had done something for her. I recalled a weird Italian story of the Middle Ages I had once heard about a fabled beauty who to test the zeal of her suitors threw her ring into a bag of asps and bade them recover it, if they dared.

In a sense I had plunged my hand into the bag of asps for Masita's sake; at any rate I had run a very real risk of capture, with life-long imprisonment to follow, in order to aid her; and the thought of it filled me with jubilation. I had made good in act the promise to serve her; and had proved to myself at least my zeal in her cause.

I felt that I had established a claim to her good will and confidence, and the knowledge delighted me; although she would not know what I had done. The fact that it would be my secret added to my pleasure, indeed; and I was glad that I had ordered Pepita not to say that it was I myself who had gone to the mainland; nor let fall a hint of the risk I had run.

I found Breva at his post, and he had more to tell me about the anger of Giuseppe and the rest against me. He confirmed all that Molta had said about their belief that I had gone to betray them; and repeated some ugly threats which had been uttered.

"You must be on your guard, Beppo. Giuseppe is hot against you," he said. "I think he knows why you went; but sees how to use the thing to accuse you of treachery."

"He has begun to work already. I have heard of it through Molta."

"He has set Agapa to inflame her jealousy against Masita. I overheard them together, planning the tale she should tell."

"Let them plan. I go my own way," I said. I was in fact as indifferent as my reply suggested.

"I believe they have been planning some scheme against Masita," he added.

"Let them plan," I said again with a shrug; but a thought occurred to me and I decided to have a good look round the old fort.

The building stood, as I have before described, at the edge of a steep bluff on the crown of some rising ground, about fifty feet higher than the rest of the island, and right on the edge of a bluff, with a sheer descent to the beach some two or three hundred feet below. The approach from the island side was by a short winding path cut between the rocks. It was at a turn in this path, about halfway between the mouth and the fort, at a spot which commanded the approach, that Breva stood by day and I by night. But I wished now to assure myself that no one could get into the place from the other side.

I made a very careful observation and seeing that it was possible for a skilful, sure-footed climber to get partly round, I deemed it best to make the attempt there and then. With great effort and at the risk of my neck I succeeded; and satisfied myself that while the thing was possible in the daylight, no one who did not court an almost certain death would attempt it in the dark.

Not caring to risk a return trip I looked about for a means of gaining an entrance into the building by one of the upper windows. There was a ledge of rock which

served for this purpose; and scaling it without difficulty, I found myself on a level with the windows of the upper story.

The window nearest to me was that of Masita's sitting-room; and as I peered in, I saw her and Pepita engaged in very earnest talk. Masita, whose back was toward the window, held her brother's note in her hand and was listening eagerly to what her companion was saying.

My face was not at the window more than a second or two; but, as ill luck would have it, Pepita saw me and her start and cry of astonishment drew Masita's attention to me before I could make sure enough of my footing to move off.

I made my way to the farthest window and gained an entrance through it into the building. That my action would be misinterpreted was certain. Masita would think that I had been spying upon her; and would laugh to scorn the explanation that I had merely been endeavouring to assure myself of her safety.

And so it proved. Pepita had hurried away at my appearance and met me close to the door of Masita's room. She was very confused and as she bade me good-morning stammered out nervously something about having been trying to cheer Masita.

"Why are you so confused, Pepita?" I asked. "I have not forbidden you to speak to Masita."

"No. I know that. But—you appeared so—so suddenly at the window, Beppo. You—you startled me so."

"Did Masita see me?"

"Of course. I was silly and cried out. I am sorry. I didn't know that anyone could get there and—and—" She broke off with a nervous little laugh.

"It is of no consequence. I came round by the cliff to

make sure that no one could get that way at an awkward time."

"You—you came by the cliff?" she cried, her eyes widening. "Why you risked your life. Don't you remember Giacomo's falling to his death there, some three months ago, when he had wagered with Ahmet that he could do it?"

"I am not dead, anyway," I replied with a smile. "Now tell me—you gave the packet and the letter to Masita?"

"Yes. Yes, oh, yes," she said with a return of her nervousness.

"And said nothing as to who fetched them?"

"Listen," she cried, putting up her hand, "is that Brevia calling?"

"Go and see," I told her; and she hurried off.

I went to Masita's room and in my character as gaoler opened the door without any preliminary knock and glanced round as if to assure myself that all was well.

She was bending over the packet I had brought from her house and her brother's letter lay open on the table beside it. She looked up at my entrance and waited for me to speak. I was drawing back to leave again, when she stopped me.

"Why do you come here?" she asked sharply.

"It is a gaoler's duty to see that all is well with his charge."

"Are you gaoler now, or—spy?"

The pause before the word and the angry glance emphasised it. "Gaoler," I said bluntly.

"You could have satisfied yourself by the window, surely." She spoke coldly and contemptuously; but changed suddenly and added with great vehemence: "Did



Beltano order you to spy on your prisoner? Or is that an added insult born of your own cunning?"

"The child rather of discretion than cunning," I replied slowly.

"Discretion!" she exclaimed with a scornful laugh. "It is not enough, I suppose, that I am kept a prisoner and subjected to all the indignities of this place, but you must act the spy upon me also, watch my actions even when I am alone and listen to the very words I utter in secret. Discretion! To play on my fears and make me dread that even these stone walls have ears and eyes to guess my secret thoughts. A discretion that is worthy of you!"

It is more than a little hard that an act dictated by no thought save for her greater security should have been so interpreted. But I could not blame her any more than I could explain. She would not have believed me.

"Have you any further wishes?" I asked after a pause.

"None, save to be freed from your spying; and that of course is impossible."

"No, not impossible. You are not spied upon and will not be."

"I have seen that already," she cried, with a curl of the lip, as she pointed to the window.

"Think what you will, I speak the truth."

"Then why were you there staring in upon me?"

"Think what you will," I said again.

She looked steadily at me for a space, and her hand fell upon the packet; she gave a slight start. "I don't understand," she murmured as if to herself.

"Have you any further wish?" I asked once more.

"Yes. When is my brother coming?"

"How should I know?" I replied with a shrug of the shoulders.

"You saw him. He gave you this," and she held up his letter.

"What is that?" I asked, affecting not to understand her.

"I thought it was your boast that you spoke the truth!"

"What is that paper?" I repeated.

"It was you who went to him. Why do you seek to deny it?"

So that was the reason for Pepita's confusion. She had told Masita that I had gone and they had been discussing it when I had looked in upon them.

"He said he would come to-day. When he arrives you shall see him," I answered, seeing that further denial would serve no purpose.

"Why did you go to him?"

"Someone had to go. That is all."

"Is it true that you were in danger, and had been proscribed?"

"You were not there to accuse me. That is still open to you."

Involuntarily her hands clenched. "I shall keep my vow," she said, as her thoughts flew back to the night of Vicino's death.

"I shall not ask you to do otherwise," I said.

Her brows drew together and she looked at me almost as if resenting my reply. "Why did you take this risk?"

"Pepita had no right to speak to you of it."

"I questioned her closely and made her tell me."

"She must learn to hold her tongue or I shall have to find another attendant for you."

"No, no, I like the girl," she cried quickly; so eagerly indeed that I thought there was something behind the

words. I resolved to question Pepita. She noticed the change in my looks and a flash of new suspicion came into her eyes. "Say rather that for some secret purpose you meant her to tell me," she added.

"There is always that supposition of course; but at least it is true that I have a secret purpose."

"I would that I knew it."

"If you did, you would not believe it," I replied and without replying to the question which face and gesture alike asked, I turned and left the room.

I found Pepita waiting for me below. "What have you told Masita?" I asked.

"That you risked capture to do her bidding, Beppo." She had shed her nervousness and replied frankly. "We were speaking of you when you showed at the window. It maddened me that she should talk of accusing you when you had risked so much for her sake."

"Why did you deny it when I questioned you before?"

She smiled. "I did not. I left you on the pretence I could hear Brevia. I have told him everything; and he says I should tell you."

"What is everything?"

"Masita asked me to help her to escape when her brother came. Brevia says you will do so. I believed that, too; but asked him first. She wants me to persuade him to have a boat in readiness for them both to get away. You will do it, Beppo? She is good and true and loathes the thought of marrying Beltano. I know you wish to help her," and she laid her hand on my arm and smiled wistfully and yet meaningly into my face.

"Have you thought of the consequences of discovery? Of Beltano's anger?"

"Molta would be glad," she replied with another smile.

"And if Masita remains, her life may be in danger—from Agapa."

I recalled the Greek's threat of an hour before. "I will speak to Breva," I said after a pause of thought.

I said nothing to him then, however, as I wished first to think out the best plan. I did not want any blame to fall either upon Breva or Pepita; and the matter would need some contriving to prevent this.

That afternoon, on the pretence of fishing, I took out my felucca; and on my return stored the gear where it would be more readily accessible than in the hut which was used for the purpose.

I heard then that Julius had arrived, and found that instead of going to Masita, he had been philandering with Agapa. Her influence over him was absolute; and it was with evident reluctance that at my instance he left her to go to his sister.

"Julius has news for Masita, Beppo," said Agapa, her eyes glittering viciously. "Beltano will be here in three days and brings a priest with him for their marriage."

"As well then as later," I replied.

Her eyes fastened on mine as I spoke and her lips parted in the curiously disfiguring snarl which so marred her face. "For once we think alike," she said meaningly, as she turned away.

## CHAPTER XII

### A GREEK SCHEME

As we walked to the old fort Julius told me that Beltano had been to him that morning to urge him to come to the island to prepare Masita for the arrival of the priest.

"You wish that she should marry him?" I asked.

"It is not my affair. Beltano wishes it. Why should I interfere? I dare not thwart him. He knows too much to make that safe. Besides he has promised that Agapa shall marry me at the same time."

"And she?"

He laughed. "Have you lost your wits, Beppo. Hasn't she promised a dozen times? Beltano will be a man of enormous influence, too. And Masita must marry someone, I suppose."

"Of course." I said no more, lest I should lose my temper with him; and after a moment he branched off to the subject of my escape on the preceding night. "How did you manage to pass yourself off as an American, Beppo? Signora Bonava told me all about it, and how you fooled that fellow, Murito."

"It was easy enough."

"But where the devil did you learn English to chatter it glibly?"

"Murito did not know enough to find me out. That's all."

"I wish I'd been there early enough to have heard you. But he found it all out afterwards and was like a madman. He sent about asking all sorts of silly questions about

sulphur mines. Oh, he was properly fooled. But you won't do it again so easily," and he rattled on in this way until we reached the building.

I turned away feeling that in counting upon his help, Masita was leaning on a rotten prop. It was as clear as the sun at noon that Beltano was using him for the purpose of this marriage and that the lad went in too great fear of him to dare to help his sister. What had been said about Agapa showed me also that Beltano was using this as one of the levers to coerce Julius. The lad was a coward of cowards; and both fear and love would turn him against Masita when the crisis came.

But she should have her way, if I could assist her. If she could persuade Julius to aid her escape, it should be my part to see that they had the necessary opportunity to get away.

I would have given my right hand to have taken her away myself; but that desire should not stand in the way of my helping in any other plan. My chief fear was that the young fool would not be able to hold his tongue, but would tell everything to Agapa and probably to others.

Agapa would be ready enough to help, of course; but if the thing leaked out to the others, there would be the devil to pay; and no small bill either.

His news about the means by which I had escaped from Murito had already set everyone agape; and Molta had a sheaf of curious questions. I did not go to the farmstead for my evening meal; but she sought me in my hut.

"You are not still angry, Beppo?" she said, with a great change in her manner.

"You accused me of lying, Molta. I do not forget."

"I am sorry. I spoke in hot haste. Forgive me. I

know now, by the news which Julius has brought, that there was no truth in the charge that you betrayed us. Let everything be with us as it has always been. The meal is ready. You won't refuse to eat with me?"

I made no response to her advance. I did not wish to be reconciled to her, and her anger was vastly more to my liking than her caresses.

"Beppo? You will not let a hot word come between us," she cried, laying her hand on my arm. I shook it off impatiently. "Why are you now so hard with me? Have you ceased to care? Why is there no longer in your eyes the light that used to answer the love in mine? Your hand never lingers in mine. There is no caress in your touch; no warmth in your kisses. You seem to shun me, as if to come to me were irksome, to stay with me distasteful, to leave me a pleasure. Would you break my heart?"

I looked at her coldly. "You forget, Molta. It is but an hour or two since you held the lash over me bidding me remember that you ruled here in your brother's absence, ordering me to obey you. As if I, Beppo Serrano, were to cringe at your feet and wince like a hound at your anger. Am I a man to fawn on the hand that threatens? And as if that were not enough, you told me I lied."

"I spoke in haste," she broke in.

"Spoke? It is not the word which angers, but the thought that prompts it. You listened to slanders about me and all the love of which you prate so glibly could not stay you from setting me no higher than a traitor."

"Have I not told you I am sorry, and asked you to forgive? What more can I do?"

"I will try to forgive; but I am not so fashioned that I can gaze one moment at the sun and revel in its brightness and next close my eyes and forget that it is shining."

"I was but jealous, Beppo; jealous of the woman I feared was winning you from me. I am only a woman in my love; and my love made me jealous. The thought that you even cared enough for her to take that risk yesterday, maddened me till I wronged you in my passion. There was no other thought behind the words than that. I could not think so ill of you, Beppo. Forgive me, and I will seek to stifle all those promptings of a miserable jealousy. Ah, you cannot dream what torture it was. Forgive me, and let us be happy once again as we used," and holding her arms wide she came toward me.

I stepped back and shook my head. "I cannot so easily forget."

"Mother of Heaven, how can you look at me so coldly?" she cried, and clasping her hands to her face distractedly she rushed out of the hut.

Had I carried matters with too high a hand in repulsing her advances? I knew her temper well enough. She had admitted her jealousy of Masita. Would she visit her wrath upon her? The thought prompted me for a moment to follow and patch up a peace and I started to obey it. But I turned back. I could trust myself to protect Masita, and the prospect of a scene of slobbering reconciliation sickened me.

Agapa brought my food and wished to resume our talk of Masita; but I cut her short, making a bad blunder as it turned out; and sent her off; and as soon as I had eaten went to relieve Breva.

He and Pepita had been discussing Masita's escape. They had already made a plan. On the following morning, while I was sleeping, they proposed to let Masita leave the fort and have a boat ready for Julius to carry her across to the mainland. Masita herself had suggested



the outlines and had broached it to her brother, telling him that the two were willing to help.

I vetoed it at once. "It is madness, Breva. How can you and Pepita face Beltano's anger? You are like children. Masita must cross in the night, or she would be seen and stopped. It is I who must answer to Beltano. Let it be to-night."

"Julius is hard to persuade. He is afraid of Beltano; and Agapa has made him promise to see her again," he replied.

"That she may learn all that passes between the two. She will help, not hinder the thing. She has already sounded me; but Julius is a coward and his fear is at the bottom of this hesitation. Can Agapa prevail with him?"

"He is more coward than fool," replied Breva shrewdly. "And if he gains so much as a hint of Agapa's real purpose, he will not stir a finger."

"Then nothing can be done to-night, and we must see what the morning brings; but you must do nothing without me, Breva," and with that I sent him away.

When he relieved me the next morning I repeated my injunction that the attempt must be made at night, and went to my hut. I slept only an hour or two and soon found that Julius was very lukewarm on Masita's account.

Agapa brought me my breakfast, and as she set it down she asked sharply: "Who has been talking to Julius about me and Beltano, Beppo? Do I owe it to you?"

"Why should I meddle in your matters? I have not spoken. What is wrong?"

"You heeded what I said yesterday—about Masita. He told me what had been arranged and that she should leave

to-day with him. But he swears he will not go unless I marry him first."

"Settle your own quarrels, Agapa. I have enough of my own to worry me," I replied.

"What will you do now about Masita?" she asked after a pause.

It was not to be thought of that I should tell her my plans, so I went on with my meal in silence.

"Beltano will be here the day after to-morrow with the priest, Beppo." I looked up and nodded. My silence irritated her. "Don't you mean to do anything?" she asked angrily.

I smiled. "Am I a priest to marry you and Julius? Or how shall I force him when even you cannot? He is not in love with me, nor I with him, indeed."

"Do you mean to do anything?" she asked again vehemently.

"Why lose your temper with me because he won't do what you tell him?"

Her face flamed with passion and her lips went up in her distorting snarl. "I will find the means," she said viciously; "and when I have found it, remember you have driven me to it," and she flung away in a rage.

Her temper, good or ill, was nothing to me, so I finished my breakfast and thought over the position. I was confident that she would try to persuade Julius to go forward with the matter; and so it proved.

Before going to the old fort I deemed it discreet to see Molta and to let her understand that, although I was still sullen on account of what she had said, the hours of reflection had in a great degree cooled my anger. I remained with her some time; but in this way succeeded in avoiding any lovemaking.

When I reached the fort about noon I found Julius closeted with Masita, and they remained together for a couple of hours. He was in sullen, ugly temper when he came from her; and on my seeking to question him, he told me gruffly to mind my own business.

I was on my way to Masita to find out how matters stood, when Pepita met me with a message from her—that she wished me not to go to her. “She is in great distress. Julius will not help. She thinks you know nothing of the attempt, and is afraid that in her present mood you will discover and prevent it.”

“The fellow is a coward,” I replied.

“She still hopes he will help; and if anything is done it will be this evening, Beppo.”

“The boat shall be ready,” I said. “I will see to that.”

I was getting very uneasy about the whole affair. There were too many in it to make it possible to keep the secret; and I seemed to scent trouble in the air; but I took such steps as I could during the afternoon to forward the project, and kept careful watch upon Julius.

Later in the day Agapa sought me out to tell me that all had been arranged. She declared that she had prevailed with Julius, and that if I would but keep out of the way he would take Masita across.

But there was something in her manner as she told the story which did not ring true. She was so eager to have me believe her, so unlike herself when speaking of Masita, so solicitous that I should not be mixed up in the thing to my hurt with Beltano, that I could feel she had some hidden purpose; and was lying to hide from me.

I determined to relieve Brega earlier than usual that evening and was starting for the fortress when Molta called

me into the farmstead. She wished to carry our own peace negotiations a step farther, I found, and she was urging a complete reconciliation when Julius entered.

He had been drinking. I saw that at a glance. His eyes were bleared and he lurched as he came in and smiled vacuously. "I'm going to be married, Molta," he said with a leer. "Agapa and I are going to the mainland to be married."

"When?" asked Molta, the same question was on my tongue.

"To-night. She's gone to Masita now to tell her. She said as they're going to be sisters they must get to know one another better. I think so, too," he added with the inane grin of intoxication.

I waited to hear no more. Agapa's eagerness that I should keep out of the way began to assume a very sinister aspect now. There was some devilment afoot. I knew that she had no more intention of becoming this drunken little fool's wife than I had, and she had only told him the tale in order to use him in some way so that she could get to Masita.

Molta had kept me so long with her that the dusk was now falling. I blamed myself for having delayed so long, and as I hurried to the fort I kept a sharp lookout for signs of trouble.

I did not look in vain. Some yards before I reached the opening of the rocky path leading up to the fort I came upon Brevia lying bound and unconscious on the ground. I unfastened his bonds quickly; but could not restore his senses; and I was rushing to the mouth of the path, when the thought occurred to me that the thing was a trap.

Agapa would be certain to bring her brother into the

affair, and Giuseppe was probably with them; these two had almost certainly overpowered Bрева; and were most likely waiting for me either inside the fort or by the entrance, while Agapa herself would be with Masita.

I recalled her threat—that Masita should not live to become Beltano's wife; and my blood chilled as I recognised she was quite desperate and reckless enough to make that threat good.

To have trouble with Giuseppe and his companion at such a juncture would be madness. Even if I fought and beat them, the fight would but be the signal for Agapa to do what she had gone to do.

For aught I knew, the deed might have been already done. I did not know how long the Greek had been in the place; and the thought of Masita at the mercy of the infuriated woman crazed with jealousy set my pulses throbbing with fear for the one, and rage against the other.

Dusk though it was, there was still light enough for me to risk the way round by the cliffs and with a prayer that I might yet be in time, I dashed away and sprang with the reckless haste of a madman from point to point of the rocks. Once I tripped and all but fell to the shore below; and my thought at the moment was not care for my own life, but despair that my failure would bring such disaster to the woman I loved.

I recovered myself by a miracle of luck, as it seemed, and with no greater hurt than scratched hands and a bruised knee; and dashed to the window by which I had before gained an entrance, creeping in as stealthily and noiselessly as I could, lest the sound of my arrival should drive Agapa to deal the blow before I could reach Masita.

Then I stood and listened.

All was as still as a tomb.

My heart sank. Was I too late?

## CHAPTER XIII

"IF I COULD ONLY TRUST YOU!"

THE moments while I stood, spellbound in fear, listening for some sound to tell me whether Masita was alive or that the desperate Greek had carried out her murderous purpose, were among the most terrible of my life. The suspense searched me through and through. I stood like a man turned to stone; powerless to move, unable to think, gripped by a vicelike paralysis of fear.

Slowly, rage began to take the place of fear. Rage against the fiend who had taken Masita's life. She should pay the price. That I vowed if I had to take her life in return with my own hands. And then my blood turned to fire, and I clenched my hands and gritted my teeth in the fierce yearning for revenge.

Suddenly the spell was broken.

A woman laughed. A laugh, soft, low, taunting, devilish, inspired by gloating triumph and pregnant with venomous hate.

How I welcomed that laugh! For it told me that Masita lived.

It was from Agapa; and the next instant I was at the entrance of Masita's room. The door stood ajar; and as I reached it, Agapa spoke.

"Aye, pray with all your soul and strength. It will not help you now. I told you you should die as I swore to the man you have bewitched. You she devil. But your prayers touch me no more than your craven pleading did just now."

I understood then that, dangerous as she was, the Greek was yet too much of a woman to resist the chance of gloating over the woman she hated. Her taunts had saved Masita's life; for they had given me time to come to the rescue.

Agapa was standing with her dagger uplifted, and from her attitude I judged that Masita, whom I could not see, was on her knees in prayer close beside her; and for the moment I was in doubt how to act. If I rushed in the weapon might be thrust home; for Agapa was facing the door and would see me the instant I entered.

I held my breath a second in suspense, and then the Greek moved back a pace and turned to pick up a crucifix from a table close by.

It was my chance. I sprang across the room and before she had recovered from her surprise, I had wrested the dagger from her hand. Masita jumped to her feet at the same moment and after a swift glance at me, fell into a chair.

For a moment in her baffled fury I believe Agapa was inclined even to risk a struggle with me. She stared at me, her eyes gleaming viciously, and her lips parted with her disfiguring snarl like a wild beast robbed of its prey.

"You had better go, Agapa," I said. "You will answer for this afterwards."

She kept her eyes on me and came forward a step, half crouching as if ready to spring at me. "You had better go," I repeated.

"Am I a dog to do your bidding, Beppo?"

"You heard me. Go!" I cried sternly, stepping toward her.

She fell back a pace and then burst into a mirthless

laugh. "Your new lover has saved you," she said to Masita.

"Hold your tongue," I answered furiously; "lest I forget that, devil as you are, you are still a woman."

She folded her hands across her heaving bosom and, throwing back her head, laughed again and stared at me. "Strike me for her sake. Show yourself a man to her that she may see what sort of hero it is she has bewitched. Oh, you love her. You know that, as do we all. Since she came to the island, what thought have you had for Molta? Why, but for her sake, have you quarrelled with the woman you had sworn to wed? Have we not all seen the change in you? Your coldness, your neglect, your——" She stopped there, shrinking from the wrath blazing in my eyes. My evil reputation for violence stood me in good stead at that moment, for it silenced her.

Without a word I gripped her by the arm and thrust her toward the door; and without a word she obeyed the unspoken command. She backed out of the room and, a prey to dire fear, hurried down to the floor below. I followed, and as she reached the outer door she crouched into a corner in dread of my violence.

I found the door unlocked and, flinging it open, pushed her out, shot home the bolts, and returned to tell Masita that the peril was passed.

She was still pale and trembling from the effects of the ordeal through which she had passed. She had lighted her lamp and her great eyes fastened questioningly on my face as she turned on my entrance. "You are safe," I assured her. "I will see that you have no more trouble of this sort."

"What have you done with her? You have not——"



"She has left the building. I do not ill-treat women," I replied, answering her unfinished question.

"She threatened my life. Did she mean really to kill me?"

"She is a Greek and mad with jealousy, and was to have been Beltano's wife. She knows that he will be here the day after to-morrow and that a priest comes with him to make you his wife."

"Is that the truth?"

"I have no end to gain by saying what is false."

"But my brother? He sent her to me here with a written message that she would help me, that she was to be his wife, and that—that you had arranged for her to come. He wished us to be friendly."

"Was it in friendship that she drew her knife? I do not yet know all that occurred, but I do know that to gain admittance for her here, Breva was bound and drugged. I found him and so learnt what had been planned."

"But you were in the building," she said quickly and with suspicion.

"It would be simpler to say at once you do not believe me. There is a path round by the cliff. I came that way."

"But why not by the door below? The way you brought me?"

"Drako, Agapa's brother, and another man would have sought to stop me. and I thought it urgent that no time should be lost."

"Then you risked your life. Pepita told me of that cliff path when I thought you had merely been spying."

"Pepita had no right to speak of it. She chatters too freely. I ran no risk. I had to get here quickly and secretly. That is all."

"She told me that only a month or two since a man had fallen to his death in attempting that path." She passed her hand across her troubled brow and then, with an effort as if she had to force herself to utter the words, she added: "It seems I wronged you when I thought you had spied upon me."

"I have a broad back, and that is not the only wrong. You were placed in my charge and I am answerable for your safety. That is why I came."

"Why do you seek to belittle what you have done?" she asked with a suggestion of irritation, accompanying the words with a shrug and a slight curl of her mobile lips. "You have saved my life and risked your own to do it. Do you think I cannot understand that, or that the obligation is more to my liking because you pretend otherwise?"

"I can understand that it hurts you to own such a thing to a man whom you have vowed to accuse. If you wish it bluntly put, then it is true that I saved your life and ran some risk, small or great as you please to think it. I have known from the first that you were in danger on the island."

She started at this and glanced sharply at me. "I understand that, I believe. Is that why you insisted upon my being here under lock and key?"

I smiled. "Infer what you please. I had to answer for your safety."

"To Beltano?" she shot the question at me as if prompted by a fresh train of thought, and bent forward eagerly to scan my face.

"Your safety is everything to me."

The answer perplexed her. She thought a second. "Do you mean because of my vow to accuse you of Signor Vicino's death?"

I made no reply to this, and she stood thinking. Then she shook her head. "Yet if that Greek had had her way, my death would have served you in that. What do you mean by my safety? You ventured to cross to the mainland, too. Why can't you be candid?" She waited for me to reply, and when I remained silent she made a gesture of irritation. "You seek to mystify me. Why? Is it true that in Levaccio you were found by the carabinieri and escaped by passing as an American with Captain Murito?"

"Yes. Who told you?"

She waived the question aside. "But he has been in America. He would know."

"I have also been in America. I speak English well enough!"

"I remember," she said with a shudder. "But I don't understand you. Who are you?"

"You know. You have heard my name often. Beppo Serrano."

"Why do you say my safety is so much to you?" she asked after a pause.

"You have sworn to accuse me of that crime, and I am resolved that you shall have the chance to keep your vow."

She stared intently into my eyes as I answered, and again I noticed the expression of half hope, half doubt in hers as she thought over the words. Then she rose and began to pace the room, stopping suddenly close to me. "Did you know of the plan that I should escape from here?"

"Yes."

"And was that why you came hurrying back here—to prevent it?"

"No."

"Do you mean you were going to help me?"

"Yes."

"Although you knew that I should keep my vow? Do you think I believe that?"

"No. I do not expect you to trust me."

She went back to her chair and sat with her face buried in her hands. I guessed the struggle in her mind. Torn between her loathing of me as the murderer of Vicino, desire to use me to help her escape, inability to believe that I would try to save her in the face of her threat, and fear that I had some secret purpose against her, she was at her wit's end what to do.

I waited in silence while she fought her way to a decision.

"I must keep my vow," she said at length, her voice strained and agitated.

"Do you wish to become Beltano's wife?" I asked.

"I would sooner die!"

"Will you let me help you to escape?"

"If I could only trust you! I know not what to do." A deep sigh of despair broke from her lips.

"If you cannot, it is hopeless! But as you will," I said slowly.

She did not reply; and in the pause that followed we heard a knock at the door below. She started nervously.

"That may be Pepita," I said; "I will answer for your safety. You need feel no fear. Take time to think of what I have said. I will help you to escape, and will have all in readiness. You can then decide."

I did not wait for her to reply and went down to the door below. It was Pepita, as I had thought; and Brevia was with her.

I sent the girl up to Masita and then questioned Brevas as to what had passed before I had found him. He told me that Julius and Agapa had come to him together as he stood on watch with a message from me that Agapa was to be admitted to Masita, to settle with her the details of her escape. Julius had left; and while Agapa and he had been disputing about the matter, for he had refused to admit her, Giuseppe had stolen upon him and he had been drugged and bound. They had then lured Pepita out, and she declared that both had remained at Brevas's post.

The thing was plain reading enough now, and with my blood on fire, I swung off to have a reckoning with Giuseppe.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE FIGHT

It was a general custom among men of the island to pass a good deal of time in the evenings, smoking and drinking and chatting, in an open space in front of the huts; and I went there expecting to find Giuseppe and Drako among the rest.

As they were not there I sat down just inside my hut to wait for them; and the interval gave me time to think over things and shape a definite course.

Since the night when I had come to myself, I had kept aloof from the rest of the men; and although my only reason was that their company was extremely distasteful, I had had broad hints from Breva that my conduct was attributed to very different motives.

My old reputation for recklessness had made them afraid of me; but according to Breva, many of them believed that my injury had so changed me that I was no longer dangerous—that I had turned coward, in fact. In this way my former supremacy had been destroyed.

I resolved that that night should see it asserted. The majority of the men were a poor lot, and were almost entirely under the influence of Giuseppe, Drako, and Ahmet the Turk. The last was away with Beltano; and the only other man of any consequence was Luigi, a fellow who had made some advances to me.

Giuseppe was the man I blamed for the attempt on Masita; but both he and Drako should feel the weight of my anger that night.

I was rummaging for some tobacco inside my hut, when the two men joined the others. I heard their voices, and glancing out, saw that the rest whispered to them and pointed in my direction. Giuseppe laughed and oathed and took his seat with a shrug of indifference; but Drako looked across with some uneasiness; and as I went over to them, his fingers played nervously with the haft of his knife.

"I have been waiting for you, Giuseppe," I said.

He took his cigarette from his lips, paused, glanced up at me and sneered. "What is it to me what you do? Wait or go. It's all one to me."

"You know what I want with you. Get up, if you're not afraid."

He laughed and swore. "I know that I don't want anything with you."

The rest sniggered at the reply, save Luigi, who drew closer.

Without another word I twisted my hand in Giuseppe's neckerchief, dragged him to his feet, and sent him staggering back. Drako whipped out his knife on the instant and rushed to attack me. But I had time to turn and crash my fist into his face. "Wait," I cried, hot with rage. "I'll deal with you afterwards. You shall have all the knife work you want."

The rest had sprung to their feet now and stood round us, murmuring against me and taking the side of the other two.

"What does this mean, Beppo? What have they done?" asked Luigi.

Giuseppe had recovered his balance and stood, white with passion at my rough handling of him, his hand on his knife.

"They both know well enough, Luigi; and both shall answer to me, by God."

I went right up to Giuseppe. He stood his ground and I saw his fingers tighten on the blade of his knife. "Do they know of your infernal treachery?"

"What in hell's name do you mean?"

"You lie, Giuseppe. You do know, and you shall answer to me."

"Who in the name of hell made you master?" he growled fiercely; and Drako led a chorus of jeers at me.

"Hold your snarling tongues," I cried, turning on them. They fell back a step, murmuring and eying me sullenly from under lowering brows.

But the incident nearly cost me my life. The moment my eyes left Giuseppe's face, he whipped out his knife and sprang toward me ready to strike. I jumped back just as the blade flashed through the air. The next instant my own blade was bared and the fight had begun in earnest.

As we stood watching each other like wildcats waiting for the chance to spring, Drako made another dastardly attempt to help his friend by attacking me from behind. I heard his rush, but dared not take my eyes from my antagonist's face; and then I heard Luigi's voice.

"No, no, Drako. Fair play. Giuseppe was the first to draw." After that not a word more was spoken; and when after a feint of Giuseppe's our positions were changed, I saw the Greek had been disarmed and that his weapon was in Luigi's hand.

We two were not badly matched. Giuseppe was somewhat taller than I; but carried more flesh. We were both strong; but I judged that I could outlast him. I had another advantage moreover. He was beside himself with passion; his eyes blazed and his furious eagerness to kill



me so mastered him that the point of his weapon quivered. The sight of the bared knives had wrought him to a frenzy.

On me the effect was the reverse. I had been hot enough in the moment before we faced one another; but presence of danger sobered me instantly, for I knew that my life depended upon my keeping a cool head.

His rage soon began to show itself in his fighting. He tired of waiting for the chance to get through my guard and began to feint, making sharp sudden rushes, springing here, darting there, lifting his knife for a blow, and leaping back; using every ruse to force me back or get me off my guard, and displaying wonderful agility and finesse.

I was glad to see his tactics. I neither gave ground nor took it; letting him tire himself if he would; and reserved my strength for the struggle to come later. My eye never left his for a second; and as he circled round me he was careful to keep well beyond my reach.

Once only he came a few inches too far, having misjudged the distance; but with a dexterous stoop and leap he saved himself.

It was a narrow escape and affected his nerve. The expression of his eyes changed. Some of the confidence with which he had commenced the fight waned; and in its place doubt of the issue began to show.

I could read this signal. He had held the same opinion as the rest: that the change in me had meant a loss of courage. He had started with a full belief that he would have an easy victory and had mistaken my stolid method of fighting for loss of skill or the result of cowardice.

The knowledge that only by a hairsbreadth had he saved himself from defeat had changed all that. He had found me ready to use chance when it had come; and began to realise how greatly he had misunderstood me. How nar-

row his escape had been was emphasised by a cry of dismay from one or two of the others.

He was now breathing hard with his exertions, too; and wishful to regain his wind, began to fight more warily.

But it was not my cue to give him the time for that; and I began to press the fight from my side. Stepping forward with a sudden feint I drove him back. As he stepped back I advanced, and he tripped. He saved himself from a fall; but once more the incident disconcerted him.

The dogged method of fighting was all opposed to his nature moreover. He lacked the patience and the self-control; and a moment later resumed his former tactics. But he was wilder now. Doubt had laid its hand on him. He was eager for the finish; baffled by my steady refusal to be misled by his feints into giving him the chance he sought; and began to grow desperate.

I saw now that I should win; and something of the feeling must have shewn itself in my eyes, for he let out a violent oath as he made his next effort to draw me into a false move.

It was almost his last. In his rage he misjudged the distance again, and again my blade only just missed his body, slashing his arm as he sprang back.

There was another murmur from the others as the blood was drawn; and in his eyes the unmistakable sign of fear was blended with his rage.

Then, by one of those chances which will come in a combat of the sort, we feinted at the same moment. For a second we were both within striking distance and both unprepared to strike.

Fortunately, I was just a flash the quicker and gripped his right hand with my left, while his hand was groping vainly for my wrist. Holding my grip, I crashed the

shaft of my knife full into his mouth and struck him to ground. As we fell together, I bent his wrist back and wrested his weapon away, and the next instant he lay asprawl on his back, the fear of death in his wide eyes as he glared up at the glistening blade held threateningly in my uplifted hand.

By all the laws of the fight his life was mine, and not a murmur would have been heard had I plunged my knife into his heart. He had been the first to draw; had changed the thing from a quarrel to a blood feud; he had sought to kill me; and had the end been different he would have thrust his knife between my ribs with less compunction than I should have felt in slaying a dog.

But I could not take his life as he lay there in my power. Had the chance come in the course of the fight I should have struck; but he was down and helpless at my mercy; and I could not strike.

"You can have your life, Giuseppe; but you know now who is master here. Have a care not to anger me again;" and with that I got up. He scrambled to his feet and Agapa and Julius came out of the trees and joined him.

A murmur of astonishment at my leniency ran the round of the men as I crossed to Drako. "Now, Drako, I'll deal with you," I said.

But all his courage had oozed away when I had beaten his ally. He cringed and slunk back. "I won't fight," he muttered.

His cowardice disgusted me; and seizing him by the throat, I shook him till his teeth rattled like castanets, and then flung him away, and turned on the rest. "Is there anyone who wants to dispute my claim to lead in Beltano's absence?"

They shuffled uneasily and no one answered. "You've had

your lesson, see that you learn it," I said, as I sheathed my knife; and they drew aside to let me pass to my hut. There are times when bluff is the only policy. That was one of them.

Luigi came to me a minute later and I thanked him for having kept Drako quiet during the fight. He shook his head gravely. "You did wrong not to kill Giuseppe, Beppo. He will only hate you the more for having beaten him."

"Better his hate than his love, Luigi," I answered.

"You will need to watch him," he replied and went off with another dubious shake of the head.

I was now resolved that Masita should leave the island that night and that her brother should take her. I was sure that, as he had witnessed the fight, a word or two from me would frighten him into obedience.

I called him over and as I led him away toward the old fort I explained bluntly what I expected him to do. He was in too great a fear of me to refuse; and I told him to come to the fort in an hour, by which time I would have everything in readiness.

I hurried there and gave Breva his instructions. When Julius arrived he was to be at once admitted to Masita and bring her to the landing stage, and in the meantime Pepita was to explain things to her.

I then got the boat ready. They did not come, however, and after waiting till my patience was exhausted, I went back to the fort to find out the cause of the delay.

Julius had not been there, so I sent Breva in search of him. Masita was waiting with Pepita at the door, and I did my best to assure her that all would still be well. I was confident that Julius would not dare to fail me.

But I was wrong. We had waited many minutes in grow-

ing uneasiness, when Breva came running back breathless and excited.

"There is hell," he said, drawing me aside. "Julius has betrayed everything to Molta. Agapa told me, and she is like a devil with rage against him for it. She is following me to see you."

I went at once to Masita. "Your brother has failed us and has made trouble. But if you will come with me I will take you across. There is still time."

But her mistrust of me was too strong. She hesitated. "How do I know that you have not arranged all this yourself?"

Her words both hurt and angered me. "As you will," I said curtly. "You had better return to your rooms. I can do no more," and I turned away.

Pepita spoke to her, striving to induce her. I caught Masita's reply. "You betrayed me to him before; how then can I believe you are not also in league with him against me?"

Again and again Pepita sought to persuade her. Agapa came directly afterwards and I went to question her.

Just then Pepita called that Masita would go; and the two came hurrying down the path.

But it was too late. The sound of many voices reached us: Molta's, Giuseppe's, and others', speaking in the high tones of excitement and danger.

## CHAPTER XV

### BELTANO RETURNS

I WAS too angry at Masita's lack of trust to be able to think or care about what was to happen, and crossing my arms leant back against the rock sullen and indifferent.

But Agapa came to the rescue. "I have a thought, Beppo. Send Masita back to the fortress. Quick," and she turned to meet the others.

I paid no heed to her words; but Pepita hurried Masita away before the rest had seen her and then returned to us. Let them do what they pleased. I cared nothing. I had done my utmost; and had failed. I had finished with the matter.

And then I saw Apaga's plan.

"Julius! Julius," she called; and rushing up to him as he stood at Molta's side, she broke out into a torrent of reproaches for what she called his delay; and declared that he was to have taken her to the island, that the boat was ready for their departure, and that she had come to the fort in search of him. She would not let Molta get a word in; and finished with an appeal to the young fool to say whether it was not the truth that they two were to have crossed together.

Then Breva, led on by Pepita, took a hand. They began to jeer at Agapa, saying some very nasty things about her lover's fickleness. She replied hotly and in a minute there was such a babel of tongues that the matter degenerated into a fierce quarrel in which all save Julius and I took part with noisy vehemence.

He stood looking from one to the other, not knowing what to make of the affair until Agapa threw up her hands and shouted to the others to hold their peace and let him decide whether or not she spoke the truth.

The silence which followed tried him more than the uproar and he glanced from Agapa to Molta and back to Agapa not knowing what to answer. In the pause, Drako pushed through to his sister's side. "Why don't you answer, Julius?" he said with an ominous frown.

This turned the scale. "What Agapa says is the truth," he muttered.

"Then what was the meaning of the tale you told me?" cried Molta angrily.

He started nervously. "Well, Beppo told me——"

"What's that?" I burst in fiercely. "Are you going to try and drag me into your silly love quarrels?"

"He told me you were going to escape from the island with Masita, Beppo," said Molta, "and we found your boat ready." It was evident from this that in his eagerness to rouse Molta he had lied in order to appeal to her jealousy.

Agapa uttered a shrill cry of rage. "Oh, Julius, how dared you? Did not you yourself urge me to get the boat? Have you lost your senses that you lie like this?" and with that she launched into another flood of passionate language, the pith of which was that she would never believe in him again after this deceit.

At this Drako, as much fooled as the rest by the scene, laid his hand on his knife and stepped toward Julius, who backed through the others and bolted in a panic. Drako started in hot pursuit; and Agapa, with cries that there must be no violence, went after them, calling to the others to follow her.

Molta stayed, however. She was in a very bad temper;

and although she had not understood the meaning of what had passed, her suspicions had been roused and she meant to question me. In her jealousy she had been quite ready to believe what Julius had said about my leaving the island; and she had taken prompt measures to prevent me.

"What does all this mean, Beppo?"

"That that young fool will be lucky if he gets through the night without trouble. These Greeks are unpleasant people to fool with," I replied with a smile.

"I don't mean that. I mean your part."

"Oh, I shan't touch the young jackass."

She stamped her foot very impatiently. "Answer me. Did you plan to leave the island to-night with Masita?"

"Are you serious, Molta?" I asked with a note of incredulity.

"Answer me," she said again, very sharply.

"Oh, yes, it's all true, of course," I said with a laugh. "I was going to take her across to the mainland and then go with her to the carabinieri in order that she might keep her vow and accuse me of Vicino's murder. I am just that sort of a fool and just longing to be imprisoned and convicted. On my soul, Molta, I believe you think I am a drivelling idiot;" and I rolled a cigarette and began to smoke.

"But Julius said you told him as much."

"Do you take his word that I have parted with my wits?"

"You have not denied it."

"I shouldn't have thought it worth while. But if Julius said I told him that I was going to leave the island, he lied. Is that plain enough?" I had not said anything of the sort to him; only that he was to take Masita. "Face him with me; and let him repeat it, if he dare."



"But were you a party to Masita's escaping?"

I let loose my temper as if exasperated by the question. "In the name of Heaven, make an end of your questions, Molta! If you think I am fool enough to let her go in order that she may denounce me, think it; or any other foolishness you please. But don't plague me with it."

My outbreak silenced her for a space; and then she said jealously, "She may have ceased to threaten in return for your help."

"True. The thought does you credit," I scoffed. "And I took that shallow-pated coward of a brother of hers into my confidence to help me because I had neither wit nor courage enough of my own for the venture."

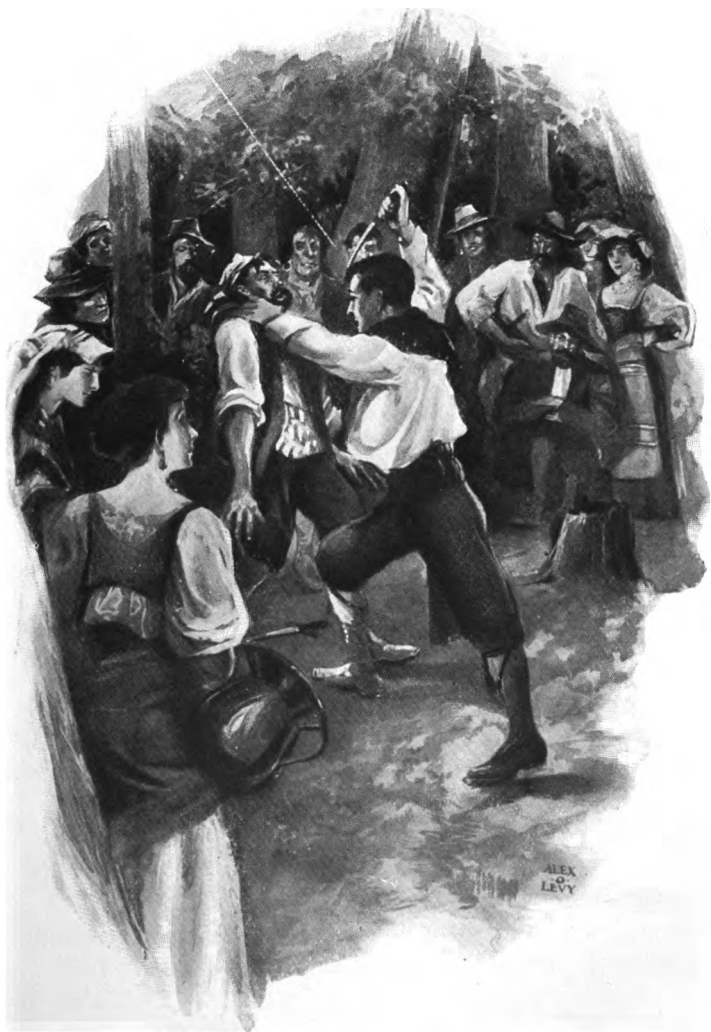
"You are but hiding something from me, Beppo, and for her sake."

"Your jealousy has already once led you to give me the lie, Molta. Are you bent on making another quarrel?"

"You are hiding something," she repeated doggedly, and in this suspicious mood she left me.

I must have been a miserable churl of a lover; and that she did not there and then turn against me was inexplicable. I had treated her with such coolness that even the others had observed the change in my conduct; we scarcely met now without a passage of words and a display of anger on my side; and I had purposely endeavoured to make her realise that I was not worth a second thought from her.

Women are women, however; and all her anger now was not caused by either words or acts of mine, but sprang entirely from the jealous impatience of my association with Masita. I believe that if I could have brought myself to make love to her with some of the ardour which I must have displayed in my irresponsible past, she would even have helped me to get Masita away, her brother's desires



There was another murmur from the others as the blood was drawn; and in his eyes the unmistakable sign of fear was blended with his rage.—Page 123



notwithstanding. As it was, however, she took a step which checkmated the scheme altogether.

She sent that night to Beltano, telling him to return instantly; and when on the following day I was completing the arrangements for Masita's departure that night, Beltano arrived, bringing with him the priest.

He was closeted with Molta for some time after his arrival, and the first intimation I had that matters had been altered came when I went down to the boats. Luigi was posted there with strict orders not to allow one of them to be used without Beltano's express permission.

I did not want any trouble with Luigi; but as one of the boats was my own property, I could use the fact to get an explanation from Beltano; so I went off at once in search of him.

I met him just as he was leaving my hut, where he had been to seek me. A glance at his frowning face was enough to shew me he was in very ill temper. "What is this trouble between you and Molta, Beppo?" he asked sharply.

"There will be trouble between me and you, Beltano, if you use that tone to me," I replied quite as hotly. "Luigi tells me he has orders to prevent me using my own boat. Why?"

"I have my reasons."

"You are welcome to them; but I shall have my own boat when I want it."

"We won't quarrel, Beppo; but I give what orders I please on the island."

"I don't wish to quarrel; but I shall use my boat when I wish."

His eyes flashed and an angry retort sprang to his lips, but he checked it and laid his hand on my shoulder with a

smile. "The order wasn't meant for you, hothead; but I had not time to explain everything to Luigi."

"Then the sooner you do so the better," I retorted. It was clearly my best course to harp on the grievance.

"I'll tell him," he replied. "And now what is this between you and Molta?"

"You have her side. Let it go at that."

"She declares you are altogether changed towards her. Do you no longer wish to wed her?"

I looked at him stolidly and sullenly and shrugged my shoulders. "Not in her present mood, Beltano, were she fifty times your sister and a thousand times as rich as she is. Twice within the past day or so she has given me the lie; and I take that from neither man nor woman."

"She is jealous of Masita, man. She thinks you spend too much time in looking after her. The risk you took in going to fetch that fellow, Julius, started the jealousy; and now she thinks you wished to leave us with Masita. She is only a woman, and such things might well madden her. It was a great risk you ran, too."

"How stands the thing? Am I still proscribed?"

"Yes, the Count has found unexpected difficulties, and he and his friends are not yet in power. All will be well later; but it will mean a lifelong imprisonment if you fall into the hands of the carabinieri at present. You are safe enough here, however, under my protection. They will not venture here. You know that of old."

That he was speaking with a purpose I could easily perceive; and I guessed that his intention was to exaggerate the risk and make me feel that my safety depended upon his good-will. "You can give me up when you will," I said.

"Why even talk of such a thing, Beppo? Are we not

friends? Come, man, shake off your ill temper. You are the last man on the island I would quarrel with," and again he laid his hand on my shoulder. "You have served me well in guarding Masita. Do you think I am not grateful?"

"How well you do not yet know, nor at what risk. Only yesterday Agapa got to her in my absence, Giuseppe and Drako having laid Breva by the heels for the purpose; and had I not climbed round by the cliff, at the risk of my life, as you know, there would have been mischief indeed. The worst. Agapa had her knife drawn in readiness, and Masita was at her mercy."

At the mention of Agapa he frowned heavily and swore. "You said nothing of this to Molta."

"Would it have pacified her to know I had risked my life to save Masita?"

"You were right," he exclaimed, and gripped my hand. "What did you do after?"

"I fought Giuseppe. He'll think twice before he tries such a trick with me again."

"I heard of the fight, but not the cause."

"They thought the change in me since my hurt meant I had turned coward. But they don't think it now."

"Giuseppe has long hated you, Beppo."

"As Agapa hates Masita and for something of the same sort of reason. You must watch her, Beltano, or she will kill Masita."

"Not while I am here on the island."

"In your very presence, man, if the need presses and the chance offers. She is as dangerous as one woman can be to another."

"I would to Heaven I could get rid of her; she and Drako, aye, and Giuseppe at the same time."

I laughed. "You're not the first man who has fooled a

woman to his sorrow, Beltano; but you chose badly when you pitched on this handsome devil of a Greek."

"She shall go or——" His face darkened ominously and he stood a few seconds staring down at the ground in moody thought.

I chose that moment to come to the point at which I had been aiming. "If you heed what I say, keep Masita under lock and key as I have. And if I had not done it, you would not have found her alive to-day."

He turned a sharp glance on me, full charged with suspicion. I could see that Molta's hints about my relations with Masita had wrought upon him.

"It is only until to-morrow, Beppo; for then the priest will make us man and wife. I am resolved on that; and Masita's brother wishes it."

"And the girl herself?" I asked with as much indifference as I could assume.

He detected the false note. "What do you mean? Are you against me in this?"

"I would not force a girl to wed me against her will, Beltano; and I doubt if you can force Masita. If you want my mind, I will be no party to force, either."

He looked at me piercingly. "The priest can also marry you and Molta. What say you?"

The train of thought was easy to follow. He wished to test whether my change toward Molta was caused by any feeling for Masita. I met his eyes steadily. "I have already answered that, Beltano."

His brows drew close together, threateningly. "You should know by this time that I am not a safe or easy man to thwart, Beppo. If you try it now, there will be trouble between us. Don't turn me from friend to enemy."

And with this threat he swung round and left the hut.

I knew what he meant. If I thwarted him my arrest was to follow.

The situation promised to be as interesting as it was dangerous; for he could be relied upon to make his words good to the very letter.

And the following day was to see the marriage take place.



## CHAPTER XVI

### THE PRIEST

AFTER Beltano left me I sat for a time thinking over the interview in a mood of profound dejection and, consuming anxiety.

I was not much concerned about the vague threats against myself; although it was intensely disquieting to know that the instant I set foot on the mainland I should be in danger of arrest. I did not believe that he himself would take any steps to give me up. It was clear that in the past I had had his confidence. He had been very anxious for my escape on the night of Vicino's death; and I could gamble on it that he had told me many secrets the disclosure of which he would fear if he played me any such trick.

His attitude in the talk I had just had with him confirmed this. He had been in a furious temper on entering my hut; but had been quick to restrain himself and to pretend that our relations were as friendly as ever. In a man of his reckless, overbearing disposition this was proof of a reluctance to quarrel with me; and there could be but one reason for this—fear of what he thought I knew and could tell.

I decided to put matters to an immediate test and went off to the boats. He had kept his word; and Luigi raised no objection now to my going out. I cruised about for an hour or so, doing as much thinking as I could over the position and trying to form some sort of plan.

My first idea was to attempt to get Masita away that night; but I was convinced that after the suspicions Molta

had raised in Beltano's mind, followed by what had passed between us he would keep such a close watch on her as to render that impossible.

I must devise some other scheme; but cudgel my wits as I would I could think of none; and I returned to the island as puzzled as ever.

Then I had the first evidence of Beltano's change toward me. On going to the old fort I found Ahmet, the Turk, at Breva's post, and he told me I was not to enter the place.

I would not stand this. "We have been good friends, Ahmet, and we need not quarrel; but I am going in."

"It is Beltano's order, Beppo," he replied. "No one is to enter."

"Did he mention my name?"

"No; but he was angry and told me to let no one at all pass."

"He did not mean to include me. I'll take the responsibility."

"I can't let you pass, Beppo."

"Then you'll have to stop me by force," and I stepped forward.

He put himself in my path. "You know what he is when disobeyed."

I laid my hand on my knife. "I shall only stop for force, Ahmet."

As Giuseppe had nearly killed him in a fight some time before and he heard the result of my tussle with Giuseppe, the Turk had little wish for any trouble of the sort with me now. I acted with deliberate purpose. If Beltano shut me out from Masita it was hopeless to think of helping her; and in her interest I must overawe the rest of the men.

He hesitated and raised his musket half way to his

shoulder. "You don't mean this, Beppo? We have always been friendly."

I drew my knife then. "I mean every syllable of it. If you fire at me, it will cost you your life." He was the worst shot on the island and even at close range could be safely depended upon to miss me.

But he did not fire. "I must tell Beltano," he said as he gave way.

"Tell him or anyone you please. It is all one to me," and I sheathed my weapon and hurried into the building and up to Masita.

I found Pepita with her and was glad that the girl had not been removed. They knew that Ahmet had been put on guard in Breva's place and were discussing the matter as I entered.

"You know that Beltano has returned then," I said to Masita. "He suspects me of having been willing to help your escape."

"Is it true that he has brought a priest with him?"

"Yes. He told me just now that you will be married to him to-morrow."

"He has been here and declares it shall be to-night; but I will not. I—I would rather he killed me. Who is the priest?"

"I know not. Some creature of his, of course."

"It is that vile fellow, Baracci, Beppo," put in Pepita. "Breva told me."

"To-night, is it?" I murmured in dismay. "Dare you risk an attempt at escape now with me. Pepita could get you some of Breva's clothes as a disguise, and I'll answer for it that we get away."

"Beltano tells me you are proscribed and that it is more than your life is worth to be seen on the mainland."

Whether she was speaking out of a new care for my safety, or was prompted by some of her old mistrust, I could not say. But I saw that it was a case for a lie. So I lied.

"That is not true. I am no longer in any danger," I said steadily.

She hesitated, fixing a keen glance on me. "But—there is my vow."

"If once you are Beltano's wife you will have little chance to keep it," I replied with a shrug. "And if you hesitate, the present chance will have passed."

"Why are you ready to run this risk for me?"

"Does it matter so long as I am ready? Pepita, run and bring the signorina some of Brevà's clothes. Quick, girl, quick."

She hurried away at once.

"Are you telling me the truth, that you are no longer in danger?"

"You will see for yourself," I answered lightly.

She tossed up her hands and sighed. "I can't understand you. Both Brevà and Pepita swear that you are a true man, but . . . You are a mystery," she said, turning away.

"You must not judge me by what you know of my past," I replied, speaking in English; "nor by what you see of me here."

At the change of language she turned her eyes full on me again. "How am I to judge you then?" she asked in the same tongue.

"If you will trust to me I swear on my honour that you shall escape."

"Why do you speak now in English?"

"You have been in both England and America and you

know that an English-speaking man holds his honour before all else."

Her eyes widened. "But you . . . You are—you are—Beppo."

I smiled. I had never thought the name could sound sweet in my ears, as it did then.

"And I have sworn to accuse you," she added when I did not reply.

"Yes," I said in Italian again. "I am—I am just Beppo. To you, an assassin."

She started and shivered slightly at the recollection the words stirred, and passed her hand across her forehead. "I must keep my vow," she murmured.

At that moment as we stood gazing silently at each other, Pepita came hurrying back. "It is impossible, Beppo. Beltano is with Ahmet," she said, affrighted.

"I will go and see what it means. In the meanwhile, Pepita, get those clothes here and give them to the signorina to secrete. Someone else may be put here to attend upon her in your place."

I went down then to face Beltano and found him abusing Ahmet for having allowed me to enter the building.

"Ahmet is not at fault, Beltano. I forced my way past him. Turn your anger on me," I said at once. "Ahmet would have stopped me and I threatened him."

Again he was careful to check his anger with me; but that he suspected my purpose in going to Masita was as plain as his dark beard.

"I sought only to relieve you of your guard, Beppo," he said.

"Breva is the guard by day. My watch is at night," I answered drily.

"You have done well. No one knows that better than I;

but now that I am back, I choose whom I will for the work."

"If I have done well, you have done ill, Beltano. I have had much trouble with the men in your absence, and when they find my orders set at naught without my knowledge, they will sneer at me. I shall keep the night watch."

"I have already ordered Juan to keep it."

"You wish to put a slight on me then?"

"Don't be so hot in the head, man."

"I am quite cool about this, Beltano. The man who takes my place against my wish will have to fight me for it. Find one, if you can," and with that I was turning away when he came after me.

"Are you set on quarrelling, Beppo? The reason for the change is that there will no longer be need for any watch. I have altered my plans. Masita will become my wife to-night," and as if very anxious to avoid a dispute with me, he kept by my side explaining his plan and seeking to assure himself that I should not attempt to thwart it.

We stood talking together some time near the huts; he questioning and I fencing with him; and I saw Pepita in eager talk with Breva; and soon afterwards she passed us carrying a bundle.

When I left Beltano I went down to see that my boat was in readiness, and as I came back up the path toward the farmstead, Agapa met me. "I have been seeking you everywhere, Beppo. You have heard that Beltano means to marry Masita to-night? You are a fool. You told him of my going to her. That is why he has hastened things."

"What is it to me?"

"You love her," she cried almost fiercely, "and yet like a tame fool would see her mated with another."

I smiled. Here was I with my plan for Masita's escape

all ready, and Agapa was mad that I did nothing. "The priest who is to marry them is to marry Molta and me at the same time, Agapa. You talk like a child."

She gestured impatiently. "You may fool others; but I have seen you and Masita together and read the glances of you both."

I caught my breath at the thought she started. "You tire me with your fool talk, Agapa."

"Then you have a plan," she cried sharply, seizing my arm and staring up into my face. "Yes, I can see you have. Is it the same as mine?"

I had no mind to trust her with my secret and, shaking off her hand, was passing on when she held me. "I will tell you mine. This Baracci is but a man. I can do with him what I will." She shrugged her shapely shoulders contemptuously, and her large dark eyes flashed as she laughed softly and threw back her head, with a confident assertion of her charms. She was a handsome devil in all truth; and that if she tried, she could hang the priest's scalp on her belt, I did not doubt. "Will you help, Beppo? or shall it be Drako?"

But I shook my head, I preferred to rely upon my own plan.

"If you were another than Beppo, I should say you were afraid. But you have some other plan. Try it; but do you know that Molta has gone to the old fort and will remain there until—the marriage ceremony. Ah, that touches you!" she cried as I started uneasily at the news. "My plan will be best. We shall see;" and with that she turned away and left me.

I sought Pepita at once and found the news was true. Beltano had taken a shrewd step to checkmate me; and one with which I could find no fault.

As I sat in my hut disconcerted, I saw Agapa and the rascally old priest together. She was fooling him to the top of his bent; coquetting with him; smiling and ogling him as if her heart were just the purest under heaven and he had it all. I saw too that he was already tipsy; and she plied him with wine, touching the cup with her lips as she handed it to him, and encouraging him to drain it with glances which fired his blood more than the liquor itself.

Then a thought suggested itself to me. I rose and strolled toward the boats, giving Agapa a signal to follow me as I passed; and she nodded, being quick enough to understand. Luigi had been withdrawn; so I got my boat ready and waited.

In a few minutes she came, supporting the priest, whose steps were now very unsteady. When they were near to the boat, she paused and tempted him to try and kiss her; and as he was about to put his arms about her, she drew back, and thrusting him violently forward, called me to help her, saying that he had insulted her.

He staggered down the steep path and fell; and as I dragged him up, she let loose a flood of invective.

He stared at her, helpless with drink and astonishment, and then turned to me protesting and denying.

"I saw it, Beracci. Shall I kill him, Agapa?" I asked, flourishing my knife over his cowering head.

"Yes, yes, he insulted me," she cried, with fierce eagerness, and made as if she herself were ready to do it.

"No," I said. "Whatever else he may be, he is a priest;" and I stepped between them as if to prevent her.

"Save me," he murmured, cowering from her behind me.

"If he stays here he shall pay with his life," she declared with a vehemence which even I believed to be real.



"You hear?" I exclaimed, turning to him. "If you stay, you die. There is a boat. Go, if you care for your wretched life."

He hesitated between what he deemed the certain death on the island and the risks of crossing by himself; and his lips mumbled quick prayers in his fright.

"Stay then," I said after a moment's pause; and turned to leave with Agapa.

"No, no, no, I'll go," and repeating his prayers to heaven, he clambered into the boat and I shoved it out with all my strength to start him on the voyage.

There was a good wind and we watched him until he was almost out of sight in the dusk, and then Agapa burst into a shrill laugh.

"What is this? Where is Father Beracci?"

It was Beltano!

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE PLAN OF ESCAPE

BELTANO looked from Agapa to me and back to her as we stood silent for the moment in surprise at his arrival.

I was about to blurt out the truth when she laughed again in his face. "What dog is loose that you would order it to heel, Carlo?" she cried.

"Where is the priest, I say?"

"You look very handsome in your passion, Carlo," she said in a low taunting voice. "You should always be in a rage," and she went close to him.

With an angry gesture and a muttered curse he waved her off and turned to me. "Beppo?"

"You are getting too fond of cursing me, Carlo. It was not always so," she said. I saw her object then. To gain time so that pursuit of the priest would be useless.

"You heard me, Beppo?"

"Are you going to curse me as well?"

"Save your oaths for us women, Carlo," she said in a low, caressing tone that galled him so that he lost his self-control and raised his hand to strike her. She did not flinch, but held up her face as if daring him. "Brave Carlo! Happy Masita!"

With a great effort he forced back his passion. "Where is Father Beracci? He came this way with you."

She smiled. "He is a good man, a holy man, a learned priest. He was shocked to find that I did not know my part and was teaching me."

I think he understood her. I did, and shut down a smile.

"Where is he?" he repeated. "Am I to wait the whole night for an answer?"

"A great and holy man," she continued in the same tone. "I think he will keep his word—to prompt me what to say when you and I stand before him to be——"

"Silence!" he broke in sternly. "I'll have no more of this. Tell me, one of you, where he is."

With provoking deliberation she pretended to look all round about us. "I do not see him. He was more than a little drunk, it is true, and perhaps we should seek him where the wine is, Carlo. Or he may be hiding in fear of your wrath. He is of the sort to be afraid of you."

In this fashion she dallied with him until it was certain that the priest would be beyond pursuit.

"I'll have no more of this and will find a means to make you answer," cried Beltano, his patience tried beyond endurance.

"I will answer you," she said. "Said I not that he was a holy man? He was too good for this world, Carlo. You should not bring angels here."

Again he lost control of himself and seized her roughly by the arm. I stepped forward. "Beltano!" I protested quickly.

"Do I need your help, Beppo?" cried Agapa sharply. "Better a blow than a curse."

He flung off her arm angrily, and was turning to leave when she stopped him.

"Stay. You shall know the truth now. There will be no marriage to-night. The vile wretch you brought here for that purpose got drunk and tried to kiss me. I threatened his life, aye, and would have taken it; but Beppo there saved him and set him adrift in a boat to return to the mainland."

She certainly looked magnificent in her defiance of him; her figure drawn to its full height, her head thrown back and her handsome eyes aglow with dauntless courage.

For a moment Beltano's rage mastered him so that he could not speak; and I looked for a furious outbreak and stood ready to interfere. But gradually the look in his eyes changed; his face relaxed much of its sternness, and his hands unclenched. Perhaps he remembered how he had loved her; maybe the knowledge that it was her love for him which had inspired her; or perhaps again it was only the recognition that to wreak his anger upon her would not serve to remedy the mischief.

Whatever his thoughts were, he curbed his temper and laughed. "Well, you have your way, and it is a better one than violence," he said, and turned on his heel.

Agapa followed him; and I was left to reflect that, although there would be no marrying that night, nor ever indeed, if Beltano could not find a priest with more courage than the sot, Beracci, I had nevertheless lost the chance of carrying Masita to the mainland until I could get back my own boat or use one of the others.

A few minutes convinced me that would be impossible then. There were two boats; but the sails and oars of both had been removed to the farmstead. In this, however, Agapa could help me on the morrow; and having found her and explained my need, I went off to the old fort to take up my watch.

I had not been there long before Beltano came to me. He told me I could keep the watch if I wished; but there was no need, as Molta would pass the night with Masita and he himself would remain in one of the lower rooms.

"What really passed between Agapa and the priest, Beppo?" he asked then.

"I told you that she attempted even Masita's life, and warned you that she was really dangerous. I saw the drunken old fool try to kiss her; and you know what she is when roused."

"But your part in it; what was that?"

I laughed as if in enjoyment of the recollection. "You should have seen it, Beltano. Beracci has about as much pluck as a crushed olive stone and clambered aboard like a girl with a mad bull at her heels."

"But you could have protected him?"

"Why should I protect a toss-pot priest?"

"You know why I brought him here. Did you send him off for Agapa's sake or your own? It is not like you to shelter behind a woman's skirt."

"As for that, I was not sorry to see his back."

"Why?"

"Two reasons. I do not wish to tell Molta bluntly that I cannot yet wed her; and I don't like your method with Masita."

"They tell me she has bewitched you, Beppo," he said sourly. "I have already warned you once not to counter me in this."

I paused to roll a fresh cigarette and, as I lit it, I held the match so that he might see my face clearly. "I don't care a rotten olive for your threats, Beltano; and you know they are no more than just empty talk."

"You helped to bring her here, Beppo," he said after a pause.

"And regret it. I am a different man since that crack on the head."

"That means she has won you over from me."

"It means this: Convince me that she wishes to wed you, and all I can do for you, I will. But if you mean to force

her, use your own measures, and don't count upon my help."

"That means you won't obey my orders?"

"In that matter, yes," I replied bluntly.

"There is no place here for a man who won't obey me, Beppo," he said hotly.

"I'm ready to leave, Beltano."

"That's for me to say. I'll see you in the morning. In the meantime remember Batissio's fate when he sought to cross my will."

"There are other things I remember besides Batissio's fate," I retorted as he turned away. He paused as if about to reply; but thought better of it, and left me.

I did not remember Batissio any more than I knew the "other things" with which I threatened him; but I understood that a crisis had come in our relations and that for the future I must reckon with his enmity.

As soon as he had gone I returned to my hut. There was clearly no use in my remaining on the watch that night, and I could make better use of the hours by resting in preparation for the work to be done on the morrow.

When I reached my hut I was surprised to find that Agapa had already carried there the set of spare gear for the boat, which I had asked her to obtain; and I carried it down to the landing stage under cover of the darkness and concealed it in readiness for the morrow.

On my return I found Brega waiting for me. He was anxious to know whether any attempt at escape was to be made that night. I told him the pith of what had occurred; and he on his side had news for me. Pepita was to go to the fort again in the morning to attend upon Masita.

As he was leaving I got from him the meaning of Beltano's reference to Batissio's fate. The man had been tried

by Beltano for an act of mutiny, and I myself had been one of those who had agreed upon his death.

The knowledge that Beltano contemplated a similar end for me did not prevent my sleeping soundly, however; although I took precautions against a surprise. I barred my door and placed a loaded revolver within reach.

It was a needless precaution so far as that night was concerned; but when I rose early I slipped the weapon into my pocket.

Beltano came to me early. Very few words passed between us. He had no wish to quarrel with me, he declared, but there could be only one leader—himself. “I won’t act in haste, Beppo. You can have twenty-four hours to think it over. If you then promise me unconditional obedience, things will be as always between us. If not, the consequences will be on your own head.”

I did not answer. I could only have told him that twenty-four years would have made no difference in my resolve to help Masita, if I could. Moreover, I was glad to have the time of grace and I kept close watch on the old fort.

During the morning Molta came out, and for the first time she appeared anxious to avoid me. To test this, for I recognised its significance, I followed and presently put myself in her way. But the instant she saw me, she stopped and turned away. I concluded that Beltano had been talking to her.

Pepita took Molta’s place with Masita, and Ahmet and another man were posted on watch at the entrance to the fort. Beltano was evidently resolved to keep me from Masita. But he did not succeed. I climbed round again by the cliff and thus succeeded in telling her my plans.

I said I would send Brevia to the fort early in the evening on the pretence of seeing Pepita; and I would go round

by the cliff and bind them both. Masita, wearing Breva's clothes, was then to leave the place and in the dusk trust to the disguise to enable her to slip past whoever might then be on guard. I would answer for the rest.

She would have raised many objections, but I could not venture to stay to listen to them, I assured her it was her only possible chance of getting away, seeing that Beltano was now full charged with suspicion of me.

The suspense during the rest of the day was trying in the extreme. I would not go near the landing stage for fear of starting a suspicion that I meditated an escape. A hundred times in every hour I told myself that my plan was impossible; that a thousand things, every one of them likely to occur, would thwart it; and I read in every incident of the dragging hours a fresh reason for failure.

But the luck was with me. In the afternoon Ahmet was taken from his post and sent off to the mainland by Beltano; I guessed that he was going in search of another priest in Beracci's place. A fellow named Pedro was posted on the watch; and here again Agapa was able to help. He was one of the many who admired her; and as soon as I learnt of the change, I told her something of my plan, and set her to wheedle him into allowing Breva to pass and then to take him away from his post.

His companion on guard was a man who had returned with Beltano from the last visit to the mainland and was little known to any of the rest. He would thus be the less likely to recognise Masita in Breva's clothes.

I saw both Beltano and Molta several times during the day; but I affected a sullen mood and would not speak to them. I passed most of the time in my hut; and after my visit to Masita earlier in the day was careful to keep away from the fort altogether.



When the time arrived I saw Agapa and Breva start for their part of the task, and, slipping off unobserved, I hurried to the cliff path and climbed round. Breva had not yet succeeded in getting past Pedro and his companion; so I bound Pepita's arms and legs, and gagged her; and in the meantime Masita dressed herself in the clothes which had been brought there on the previous day. Breva arrived just as I finished with Pepita, and having bound him, I gave to the room the appearance of a struggle having taken place; and left my knife behind, with my name on the sheath, to shew Beltano that it was all my doing and not Breva's.

Peering through one of the narrow slits of windows I saw that Agapa had succeeded in getting Pedro away; and the moment of crisis had come.

"Put a bold face on it, and all will be well," I said to Masita. "As you go out, turn and call out something to Pepita in an angry tone, then slam the door behind you, as if you two had quarrelled. If the man speaks to you, don't answer, but gesture as if you were in a furious rage. Then walk off toward the huts and look for me close to the landing stage."

I scrambled out of the window then and as soon as I was safely across ran round the path to the fort to make sure, by force, if necessary, that Masita got past.

I did not wish the man on watch to see me unless I had to interfere; so I waited and listened. I heard the door opened; Masita's voice raised in anger; the slamming of the door as I had told her; the man's voice with a bantering question; and then Masita's footsteps as she passed him.

I turned away with a sigh of relief. But then my heart gave a sudden bound.

Beltano was in sight walking quickly toward the fort.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE ESCAPE

FOR a moment after catching sight of Beltano I stood like a fool, at a loss what to do. If he saw Masita coming out of the path from the fortress he would certainly stop and question her in the belief that it was Breva; while the mere sight of him would probably scare her wits out of her.

Like a flash I saw the only possible thing to do. He should not stop her. On that I was firmly resolved, if I had to shoot him on the spot. But there was another plan; and although it involved the telling of lies, I hurried to meet him to put it in operation.

"What are you doing here, Beppo?" he asked sharply.

"Looking for you, Beltano. I can't endure this any longer. All day it has been like a plague on me."

"Can't endure what?"

"We have been friends too long to quarrel over a woman. I am sorry I crossed you in the matter of Beracci. I admit I acted of intent. It was more my work than Agapa's. But I can't lose your friendship," and I thrust out my hand with an impulsive gesture.

His face lightened and he gave me his hand; and just as we gripped, Masita came hurrying in our direction and, seeing Beltano with me, stopped in alarm and put her hand to her heart.

"This is good news, Beppo. You are right. We are too old friends to quarrel over a woman."

"I think that blow must have made a fool of me," I said.

"And Molta?" he asked.

"I was coming to you both," I replied. "Come back with me to her now and help me make peace. I have been a fool, but see my folly. It is not too late?"

"Hullo, what is Breva doing?" he broke in, catching sight of Masita, who, after hesitating in great embarrassment, had made a detour and was passing at sufficient distance to mislead him in the dimming light.

"Do you mean it is too late?" I cried earnestly, grabbing him by the arm and peering anxiously into his face. "Is that why you break off so?"

This had the desired effect. He turned from Masita directly and smiled. "No, no. Was I ever one to reject such an overture? I am glad to be friendly again."

"Then let us go to Molta," and in this way I got him to turn back.

Masita, seeing us walk off together, was utterly at a loss what to do and where to go, and I began to fear that after all she would do something which would betray our plan. When we were some halfway to the farmstead I stopped abruptly. "I am shamefaced, Beltano. I tried to speak to Molta to-day and she avoided me. Go you first to her and prepare her for my coming. I cannot humble myself to her; it is not my nature; and if I come upon her unprepared she may say that which will rouse my anger and so spoil all."

"She loves you too well, Beppo. Have no fear of that."

"No, no. Go first. Women are not like men in these matters and harder to win round."

He had no suspicion of my good faith and laughed. "She will fall into your arms, man. Her heart has been heavy these days past."

But I was stubborn; and in his newborn desire to please me, he yielded to my wish and hurried on to the farmstead.

As soon as his back was turned, I sauntered across to Masita, and as he passed out of sight I rushed her down to the beach.

Unearthing the gear I had hidden the previous night, I flung it into the boat, and helping Masita in in silence I bade her lie down out of sight as I cast off and plied the oars with might and main, making straight out to sea.

I could afford to run the risk of discovery, for there was no other boat on the island. The priest had gone off in mine, and Ahmet had taken the second when despatched for Beracci's substitute.

I had rowed some five hundred yards or so, and was setting the sail when a shout from the island proclaimed that someone had seen us; and I saw two or three of the men run down to the landing stage.

I told Masita not to show herself, and when I had the sail hoisted I laid a course well to the north to avoid the risk of meeting Ahmet on his return. We slipped through the water at a good speed, and the island bluffs began to grow indistinct before I deemed it prudent for Masita to move.

She sat a long time in silence; and I observed, not without a smile, that she covered her lap with a sail cloth, letting it fall round her like a skirt.

"You are not sailing for the mainland," she said at length. "Where are you taking me?"

"Ahmet has crossed in search of a priest to take Beracci's place, and I am keeping away to avoid meeting him. I shall land you at the usual place. I shall not play you false."

"Should I not believe you, after this? You have forced me."

She spoke almost as if I had also forced the admission

from her; but it was good hearing none the less. I made no reply, and again there was a long silence.

Curiosity made her break the silence. "I did distrust you when I saw you and Beltano together. What were you saying? You were talking together very earnestly."

"He came upon me unexpectedly. We had quarrelled overnight and again this morning, and to prevent his going to the fort and so discovering what had occurred there, I told him I would let him have his way and wished to be reconciled."

"Have his way in what?"

"In what had caused the quarrel."

"Why had you quarrelled. Was it about me?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. I wish to know. I have a purpose."

"I helped to send the priest away from the island last night and he threatened me in consequence."

"Helped? Who else was with you?"

"Agapa. It will do you no good to learn all that has passed."

"That dreadful woman. Why did she help?"

"She loves Beltano, and was once to have been wedded to him."

"It is galling to be under an obligation to such a woman."

"She did not do it to help you, but to baffle him."

She thought this over and said presently: "Then you blinded Beltano with a promise of reconciliation? He will kill you if you are ever in his power again. It is horrible," and she clasped her hands and sighed.

I was busy altering the course of the boat then and made no answer.

"I wish I had not come," she exclaimed suddenly.

"What are you going to do when we land?"

"See this thing through and then decide."

"You must not come with me," she cried quickly.

"I am not likely to force myself upon you, signorina."

"I don't mean that. Why should you say such a thing? I mean on your own account."

"I promised you the opportunity of keeping your vow, and I mean to keep my word."

"Why do you always remind me of that?" she cried vehemently, clasping her hands to her face.

"It is no wish of mine to distress you."

She sat with her hands to her face for many moments and then spoke abruptly and with much vehemence. "You know I could never keep that vow after this. Does it please you to humiliate me?"

"God forbid!" I replied earnestly.

"You do it. What is all this but humiliation? Am I not beholden to you for my escape? Is it not you, the man I swore to accuse, who has been my only friend in all this trouble? Have you not forced me to trust you against every instinct and feeling in my heart? Is it not humiliation that I should have to eat my words and renounce my vow? Are not the very clothes I wear a shame and a degradation; and are they not worn at your bidding? Could I ever look upon you again without a flush at the recollection? And now as a very crown of thorns in my trouble you remind me that you are an assassin."

"I am sorry, signorina. Let us talk no more. We are close now to the landing stage and a few minutes will see us there."

"How does that help me? You deceived me yesterday. You told me that you were no longer in danger from the carabinieri and that Beltano had been able to arrange the

matter; but Pepita told me the truth, after you had been with me this morning. You have broken with Beltano and the rest on the island; you cannot return there. You are proscribed, and from the instant you set foot on the mainland you will be in peril. Have not I brought you to this pass?"

"I beg you not to think of this. It is nothing to——"

"Nothing!" she broke in vehemently. "It is everything. Do you believe I am so vile that I do not think of your safety? Such a thought is an insult. Can't you see that common gratitude compels me to shield you, and that your attempt to make light of what you have done but adds to the obligation? Would you have me beg of you on my knees for permission to do what is my plain duty?"

"I mean no more than that I can take care of my own safety."

"That is not true; and you know it is not. You say it only to try and ease my mind. If you are caught by the carabinieri and brought to your trial, should I not be forced to testify against you?"

"I shall not be caught."

"You mean you would kill yourself first. Would that be easier for me—to know that I had brought you to death? Could I think of that without shame?"

"It is but a few hours since you were set upon accusing me yourself?"

"Oh, how cowardly is that! As if I meant more by the threat than to test the honesty of your offer! I did not believe you would run this risk. How could I, after all you had done against me? I did not trust you—then."

The last word came as a sort of afterthought; and how welcome it was! "If you have learnt to do that, nothing

else matters," I replied. "And now, please, we are too close to the landing place for it to be safe to speak."

I let the sail down and took to the oars, creeping silently round the cliff into the little cove where we were to land. Just before I ran alongside the stage I stopped to listen. I judged there might be some men about, either the carabinieri or Ahmet's companions. But all was as still as the grave.

"The moment we land you will come with me up the beach and I will get a horse from Solferino's."

"You must not land," she replied. "You shall not."

"It is I, not you, who decide what is to be done. You could not get a horse."

"Do you think I am afraid of the dark? I am not a child. You shall not land."

"You forget the disguise you are wearing."

At that she hastily drew the sailcloth higher over her lap; and after a pause burst into a soft, low, musical laugh. "It is absurd," she murmured.

It was the first time I had heard her laugh and the music of it ravished me.

But on the instant she changed again. "Oh, what a heartless wretch you must think me to laugh at such a moment," she said earnestly.

"I do not deem you heartless. I understand. But you must do what I wish. Come." And having made the boat fast I stepped ashore and held out my hand.

She sprang out and ran past me. "I forbid you to follow me," she said, as she dashed on ahead up the beach.

I disobeyed of course, and overtook her. When I reached her, she stopped and turned on me almost fiercely. "You must not come. You shall not."

"I will not let you go alone," I replied quite as firmly.



"Ah, you are a coward to seek to shame me dressed as I am. If you have the least regard for my feelings, you will do what I ask."

"It is not safe," I urged, in sore perplexity between my anxiety for her safety and my wish to please her. "But you can go."

"You mean to follow me," she said, quick to read my purpose. "Please me in this. Go back to the boat. Land at some other safer spot and—and when you are really safe let me know how I can send to you."

I was as a child at the touch of her hand. "As you will," I said, and drew back that she should go.

"It is for you I am thinking. I shall never forget what you have done now," she cried quickly and with that sped away in the darkness.

I stood a moment regretting my word and hesitating whether to break it and follow. I made a few strides after her; paused, and with a deep sigh was turning to retrace my steps to the boat when out of the darkness came a cry of alarm from her, the sound of a scuffle and the gruff voices of men.

I dashed after her and drew my revolver as I caught sight of her struggling in the grip of a couple of men.

## CHAPTER XIX

### ON THE MAINLAND

My first thought as I ran to Masita's help was that she had fallen into the hands of the carabinieri who were still on the watch for me. But I was wrong. They were island men. One of them was a stranger to me; but the other I recognised as a fellow named Giovanni. They had either crossed with Ahmet or had been placed by Beltano as an additional means of preventing Masita's escape.

As soon as I saw this I pocketed my revolver. I could rescue her without violence. "Let the lad go, Giovanni," I said as I reached them.

"Beppo!" he exclaimed in surprise and some fear.

"Yes, Beppo. Do what I say and do it at once."

"But Beltano's orders were——"

"Do what I say first and talk afterwards," I broke in sternly.

He was holding Masita and drew back a step, but his companion caught hold of her and faced me resolutely. "I don't take my orders from you," he said.

"Does Beltano know you are coming here?" asked Giovanni nervously.

"I will answer to him. Do as I say."

The two men whispered hurriedly together over Masita's head. Then the question was repeated, this time by the second man; and I could tell by his manner that Giovanni had said enough about me to change his tone.

"My patience is out. Do as I say," I cried sternly.

Giovanni waited for no more and released his hold of

Masita at once. His companion hesitated a second or two and then with a shrug of the shoulders loosed his hold. "It's your doing," he said to Giovanni.

"Now that this foolery is done, get me a horse at Solferino's, Giovanni."

"There are two here for our use," he replied; and led me to where they stood. This was a stroke of good luck indeed; but I did not wish them to see us mount. They would have detected Masita's sex in a moment. "Go down to the boat and see that all is in readiness for me to leave the instant I return," I told them.

They went off, but Giovanni returned a moment later. "You'll have to be careful, Beppo. The carabinieri are on the lookout for you."

Masita heard this. She had not opened her lips before them after that one cry of alarm; but the instant he had left us alone she urged me to let her go by herself.

"You have seen for yourself that this is impossible. There is no time to lose," I replied, and without any more ado I swung her up into the saddle.

"You are very masterful," she protested.

"Can you manage the horse on that saddle?"

For the second time she laughed; but this time there was a touch of nervousness, almost of hysteria in the laugh.

"I can manage," she murmured.

On that I mounted and we set out.

"Those men frightened me, I think," she said presently.

"They would have taken you back to the island. You might well be scared."

"Is there to be no end to my obligation to you?"

"Yes, when you reach your house. I am sorry it galls you so much."

"How dare you say that? You know that I——" She checked herself and left the sentence unfinished.

"No matter what I know or do not know. If you feel able now, we had better push on."

For answer she urged her horse and cantered on for some distance. She sat her horse perfectly, I observed, as I let her keep a little way ahead. When we came to the hill where I had had so narrow an escape of capture on my return from her house, she drew rein and waited for me to join her.

"I am quite safe now. You must go back," she said at once.

"I am not going back. I shall not leave you until you reach your house. We are only wasting time."

"I am among my own people now. No harm can possibly happen."

"We are wasting time," I repeated.

"But I will not have you with me. I will not," she declared emphatically.

"Then I will go on ahead," and suiting the act to the words I clapped my heels into my horse's flanks and rattled down the slope and up the other side at a smart pace, leaving her no option but to follow.

She caught me up and passed me, and then drawing her horse nearly on his haunches, she turned so that he blocked my path.

"You shall not treat me as a child in this way," she exclaimed almost angrily. "You must return while it is safe. If you ride on again I will not follow."

"You are very wilful; but if you think your will is stronger than mine, you do not understand me. I tell you plainly that no plea, no argument, and no temper shall

make me change my resolve to see you safe before I leave you."

"Then listen to me," she replied, her voice vibrating with energy. "If you won't do what I say, I declare on my word I will ride back to the boats and return to the island."

"You speak like a child," I exclaimed; and before she could guess my intention I seized the bridle of her horse and digging my heels into my own animal, I forced the two to canter on, keeping my grip of her rein, and turning a deaf ear alike to her protests, reproaches, and anger.

In this way we travelled for a mile or more, until I knew that we had reached the boundary of her estate. I released her then and she halted immediately. I pulled up also and looked for a very angry outburst.

But she laughed. "It was a cowardly trick," she declared.

"There was no other way, and I am not easy to cross."

"Don't I know that now? You do not leave me much chance of not learning it. I was never treated so in all my life. You made my very blood boil with rage. If I had a whip I could have struck you."

"I knew that you had none; and I do not fear your anger. I know that this gate leads to your house. Will you ride there or shall I take the horse back with me?"

"Where are you going?" she asked after a slight pause.

"I have not yet decided. My task is finished. You will be safe now that you are on your own ground."

"But you?"

I laughed. "I can look after myself."

"I mean, would you rather have the horse or will it hamper you?" She stumbled over the question as if it were hard to frame.

"It will probably make no sort of difference. I will open the gate," and I dismounted and did as I said.

"I shall be safe on foot," she replied as she slipped from the saddle and put the bridle into my hand. "How am I to thank you?"

"I ask no thanks; and deserve none. I have but repaired some of the trouble I caused you before. Stay. There are two favours you can grant me. Keep out of Bel-tano's clutches lest you fail another time to find help. That is one. The other—to let our last words be in English."

"Why?" she asked with quick curiosity, speaking in English.

"The reason is my secret. Good-bye."

"But I shall hear when you are in safety? It is not good-bye, therefore. I wish to hear that all is well with you."

"No—unless—— But that is impossible. It is good-bye."

She was standing close to me and impulsively thrust out her hand.

But I drew back. "You forget. I am Beppo, the assassin."

Instinctively she withdrew her hand with a shudder; but as quickly put restraint upon herself and held it out again: I doffed my hat and stood with lowered head. "Good-bye," I said again, and waited for her to leave.

Instead of going, she started. "Mother of Heaven," she exclaimed under her breath; and taking the bridles of the horses drew them and me inside the gate. "Horsemen," she whispered pointing down the road.

Her ears were quicker than mine, and had caught the sound before me. But as she shut the gate I heard them also.

She dragged at the bridle of her horse and forced him into a trot, running at his head. "Come," she whispered.

I followed. We were on a turf bridle path and when we had covered some hundred yards she stopped and with nervous haste tied her animal to the branch of a tree, urging me in the same whispering tone to fasten mine. "Come," she added.

"There is nothing to fear," I replied. "Whoever the men are, they will have no suspicion that we are here."

"Come. You must. You must."

I shook my head. "There is no danger."

"But I am unnerved and afraid of the darkness. Someone may be lurking in the trees. I am afraid to go alone;" and she shivered as if in alarm. "Look, are not those figures moving in the olive grove yonder?" and she pointed among the trees to our right.

"There is no one there," I replied.

"My nerves are unstrung. I see danger all about me. Come with me to the house. I shall never reach it alone."

I yielded then. She was overacting this sudden fright; but I was anxious for her to get to the house; and as she was apparently resolved not to go by herself, I saw it would save time to go with her.

As we started we heard the horsemen halt at the gate by which we had entered and then Masita broke into a quick run and did not halt until we reached the house.

"You must come in," she said, breathing hard from her running.

"No," I declared resolutely.

"I insist upon it. You cannot escape dressed as you are. I will give you some of my brother's clothes and you can again play the part of an American. But in that dress it would be impossible. You can trust my servants."

"I thank you for the thought, but I will not enter your house."

"You believe I would betray you?" she exclaimed warmly.

"On my honour, no."

"Then you are ashamed to be beholden to me?"

"Again, no. I can shift for myself as I am."

"You mean that you will not enter?"

"I mean that there is no necessity for you to run such a risk as might result were I to enter."

She turned as if to make a hot reply, but checked it, and paused to think. "As you will. But this I declare. If you will not have my help in your need now, I will not accept yours;" and she set off back in the direction of the horses.

"Where are you going?" I asked, hurrying after her.

"Back to the island."

"Are you mad?"

"I am not more mad than you. If you will not let me repay some of this obligation, I refuse to be your debtor."

"I will do what you wish," I said; and then we returned and I entered the house with her.

She led me to a small room and asked me to wait there until she returned. I sat down in the dark, full of wondering surprise at her conduct. Her sudden concern for my safety touched me to the quick. Only a few hours had passed since her every thought of me had been inspired by loathing, every glance eloquent of distrust, and every word contemptuous and disdainful.

And yet now my refusal to enter the house and accept her help had brought that wilful and almost passionate declaration to return to the island—to the fate from which she had narrowly escaped.



That she should feel some amount of gratitude for the help I had been able to render was natural enough, no doubt: but from what she had told me of my former conduct to her it was clear that I owed her far more reparation than I had made. Beltano had told me that I had been the means of getting her to the hut on the night of Vicino's death; and she herself had described how I had bound her with my own hands to make her a prisoner.

My help now was therefore but the undoing of that part of the trouble I had brought upon her: and so the accounts were nothing like squared. Yet she was now resolved to secure my escape. I could only presume that her heart was large enough to forget and forgive my other offences against her.

Still I could not but marvel at the confidence she had shown in me. Believing me to be nothing but Beppo Serrano, the Italian ruffian, Beltano's lieutenant and accomplice in his disreputable schemes; and an assassin proscribed for a deed of blood, she had none the less brought me into her house at night, reckless of all considerations save one—the desire to aid me in escaping the penalty of my crime. And this in the face of the solemn vow she had taken to accuse me with her own lips!

Is it any wonder if strange, vague, wilful hopes sprang up in my mind that there might be some other feeling than mere gratitude at the root of this change in her? If she could feel thus for an Italian scoundrel whose hands were dyed with the blood of a fellow creature and place such confidence in him, how would it have fared with her had I met her in my own character, unpolluted by all these abominable associations with Beltano and unstained by the deed of which she and others believed me guilty?

Was I really guilty? As I sat waiting for her in the

darkness, the horrors of my position forced themselves upon me with maddening intensity. That one deed stood between Masita and me as an insuperable barrier. The very hopes inspired by her thought for me now made me realise more vividly than ever before the cruel injustice of the burden Fate had laid upon me. But for that, I might have encouraged those hopes, instead of repressing and scouting them as wild and tantalising impossibilities.

And from that mood sprang a new resolve. At all hazards I would search out the truth about Vicino's death. It was now all in all to me to know it. On the island I had been too engrossed by thoughts for Masita's safety to follow up the doubts which Breva had raised as to my part in the matter.

But now that she was safe I would do it. My course was clear. Let the risk be what it might, I would return to the island and ascertain the truth.

As I came to this conclusion I heard the rustle of skirts outside the door and Masita entered carrying a shaded lamp the bright rays of which fell, like the halo of a fair saint, around her shapely head and lovely features.

## CHAPTER XX

### A DESPERATE PASS

As I stood gazing at Masita, dazzled by her beauty and embarrassed by my new wild thoughts in regard to her, I became suddenly conscious of the uncouth, incongruous figure I presented. My rough peasant's dress was disordered and begrimed, my hair was tousled and long, my hands were dirty and hardened with work and exposure, and everything about me coarse and mean and sordid. I seemed to read some such verdict in her eyes.

"I wish to go," I blurted out, as my gaze fell before her, and I fingered the cap I held with the uneasy self-consciousness of a clown in the presence of a princess.

She was quick to repress the start of repugnance which I had seen in her eyes as the light had first fallen upon me and as quick to notice the change in my voice. She read it as mistrust. "You shall go, of course. All is in readiness. Come with me and I will show you."

She turned and led the way to a room along the broad corridor. "You will find everything for your disguise there."

"I do not need a disguise. Only to leave the house as I am."

"Why is that? You have changed your mind."

"I wish to leave the house," I repeated.

She thought a second. "I must speak to you first; but I did not wish my servants to see you—until you were differently dressed. But as you will. I can trust them absolutely. Come with me."

She turned into a room close at hand where a meal had been laid out which a couple of servants were waiting to serve.

"I thank you, but I have no need of food."

With a sign she dismissed them. "You have some fresh intention. Tell me," she said as soon as we were alone.

"I can only say that I must leave the house."

She looked at me intently and then the earnest expression yielded to a faint smile. "I know you now too well to think of prevailing with you. But at least you will tell me what you mean to do and where to go."

Her manner was a curious mixture of solicitude and patronage, as if eager to know my plans, but unwilling to show her desire. In the brief time which had passed since our arrival at the house our relations were altered. She was the wealthy mistress of all about her, and no longer dependent upon my help; and I a peasant who had rendered her a service which she felt constrained to repay and reward. At least that was how I read the change in her. And as if to emphasise it, she spoke in Italian.

I had no right to complain, of course. I was far worse than a peasant in her view. But the fact that she could not know otherwise did not reconcile me to the change, nor ease the galling pain it caused me. I had hoped, like the love-crazed fool I was, that some subtle instinct would have shown her that I was of a different mould from the men of the island and have led her to understand my motives. And my heart was sick with disappointment.

"Where I go and what I do can be nothing to you," I replied, sullenly and resentfully in my reasonless anger, like the churl I was.

"There you wrong me. I should indeed be ungrateful if it were otherwise. I owe you what is more to me than

my life; and you must not refuse me the opportunity to repay you so far as I can. I can aid your escape and I wish to do so. I brought you into the house for that very purpose. You can get away not only from this district but from Sicily altogether. To a man capable of doing what you have done for me, such a life as that with Beltano must be intolerable. I ask no questions as to how you came to join him. You have told me that you have changed since—since the act which has brought you into danger. You need only a chance to do well for yourself and live down the recollection of all this part of your life. I wish to think that such a chance is given to you and that in some degree I can help you to it."

"Are you offering me money?" I asked bluntly, with a bitter smile at my fool thoughts of a few minutes before.

She winced and frowned and shook her head quickly. "Don't put it so. I am rich; but it is not with money I should dream of repaying an act which no mere money could compensate. It is a new life I would have you lead. A life perhaps of toil and struggle; but an honest one, away from the men among whom you have been living and removed from the temptations which must have drawn you into association with them. In northern Italy I have an estate where you can make for yourself a home and——" She paused and threw up her hands as I shook my head. "I am afraid I put it clumsily," she added, with a half suppressed sigh.

"On the contrary. I thank you for the offer."

"But you decline it?"

"Yes, although not from such motives as you may think. I am not in need of such help—or indeed of any help of that sort. I have still work to do, a task to accomplish;

and that of itself would make it impossible for me to accept your offer."

"You will not let me do anything for you?"

"There is nothing which you could do."

"Can I not help you in the work of which you speak? Although you have seen me alone and in Beltano's power, I have influence here in Sicily and powerful friends who would help you."

"Again I thank you; but it would be of no avail."

"Tell me at least what it is."

"Even that is impossible. If I succeed you shall know. That is all I can say. If I fail—well, nothing will matter then."

She bit her lip in sudden vexation and turned away; but almost instantly came back. "I cannot let you go in this way. I owe you so much. You have risked so much for me. I cannot let you go. Do you know the danger you are in of arrest? I have heard it again from my servants since my return. The whole countryside is ringing with your name. It has even been planned to send a force to the island to find you. Your description is published everywhere; and the reward for your discovery has been doubled within the last two days. I have thought of a plan for your escape. I myself will go to Trapani and take you with me disguised as one of my servants."

But I could only refuse. "I thank you more than I can say. I know the risk which such a journey would entail for you; but it is impossible. I shall not leave the district until I have done what I must do."

"Tell me that, then. Heaven knows my will to help you. Can you not trust me?"

"I should despise myself if I could not. If I am silent it is from no such motive as that."

"Then tell me. Let me do something."

I hesitated. If I told her, she would see that I must return to the island and face Beltano's anger for having helped her. It would do no good to tell her.

She saw my hesitation and waited for my reply with every appearance of intense anxiety.

In the pause there came a loud knocking at the door of the house; and a moment afterwards a servant entered, hurriedly saying that the carabinieri were there.

"Hold them a moment," said Masita to the man, and then to me. "I must admit them; but they shall not find you. Come."

She led me to a room close by, where a woman servant, white and scared of face, was waiting. "This is my dressing room; my bedroom is yonder. Go there and hide. Even if they search the house, they will not venture to intrude there. Bianca, this is a friend to whom I owe my life; more than my life, indeed; conceal him in my room and wait you here. If any come here, call to me; but if you love me, no one must find him."

The woman's eyes widened in astonishment and, as Masita hurried out, she gave me a glance of profound disfavour. But after a moment's thought she stowed me away in a closet among her mistress's robes. The place was admirably chosen for the purpose. It was constructed in a very deep recess in the wall and as the floor at the back was lower than that of the front, which was on a level with the room, it afforded me space in which I could lie down. The woman covered me carefully with shawls and garments of one sort and another, and having assured herself that I was entirely concealed, she went away, leaving the door of the closet ajar—a cunning device suggesting that the place was put to none other than its ordinary use.

My first thought was one of amazement at Masita's reckless consideration for my safety. To shelter me at all under such circumstances was to run the risk of grave penalties; for my discovery must inevitably involve her very seriously with the authorities. But to have hidden me in her own chamber was to hazard her very reputation and good name.

I cursed my stupidity for having yielded to such an extreme step in the moment of consternation at the arrival of the men; and regretted with impotent bitterness that I had dallied long enough in the house to give them time to get wind of my presence there.

I had not dreamed that the pursuit would be so swift and keen; and then I began to consider how they could have found me so quickly. There could be but one explanation. Giovanni and his companion, tempted by the reward offered for my capture, must have put them on my track. Instantly I saw how such treachery would add to my peril.

They would tell how I had ridden away with a companion; a search of Masita's grounds would lead to the discovery of the two horses; the patrol would know that we had not passed the house; and the inference was clear and direct that I was sheltering there.

Tortured by these thoughts and by the knowledge that Masita had so compromised herself, I was on the point of scrambling out of my hiding place to try an escape by the window, when I heard the woman, Bianca, enter the bedroom and move about as if to prepare it for her mistress, crooning to herself the while one of the folk songs of the district.

I took this to be her method of impressing upon anyone who might be within earshot the fact that she was merely



engaged in her ordinary duties. But as she approached the closet where I lay, I caught her words. She was warning me to lie as still as death, as there was great danger. The men were searching the house.

A minute later I heard Masita's voice speaking in hot protest against the indignity of the search.

"I have already explained, signorina, that I have no option but to obey my orders," replied the man. "Our information is precise that the scoundrel came here. I have sought to do my duty with the least inconvenience to you and your household; but I am bound to answer to Captain Murito."

"Bianca, these men insist upon searching even my bedroom. They think that some criminal may have entered without our knowledge."

The woman was at that moment at the closet in the act of taking out some wrap. As if in surprise, she let it fall upon me, covering me still more effectually. "I have been here all the evening, Excellency. I was just preparing for you to retire." Most naturally spoken without a tremor in the voice.

I lay as she had bade me, still as death. It was Masita's safety as much as my own which was now in peril.

I heard one or two men moving about the room in the work of the search. Bianca moved away, leaving the door of the cupboard wide open now. For a few seconds there was silence save for the movements of the searchers, and then, as if Masita understood that the sound of my breathing might be heard, she again addressed the leader.

She changed her tone now; and was calm, pacifying, half-apologetic for her former heat, excusing the man's own action, and laying the blame on Murito. Seeing that the search would not be prevented, she sought to hold his at-

tention and distract it from the task and so minimise the risk of discovery.

Her charm of manner wrought upon him. When he replied, he was close to the place where I lay and he turned to apologise profusely.

"I was hasty, signor," she said; "and I regret my words. There is now only that dress closet to search. May I be woman enough to beg that as you search it you will have mercy upon my frocks."

"Have no fear of that, pray. I only wish, in all sincerity, I could have spared you this trouble."

With that he approached the cupboard and I held my breath in suspense.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A FRESH DANGER

As the man began to feel among the dresses above me and to move them aside two of them fell and Masita uttered a little exclamation of concern. "Oh, please, please, take care. Let Bianca clear the place for you," she cried. "It will not take more than an extra minute."

It was a subtle stroke and succeeded. To my intense relief the man drew back. "There is no need. I am satisfied, signorina," he said.

Bianca hurried to the cupboard and snatched up the fallen dresses to replace them on the hooks, grumbling audibly the while at his carelessness.

The danger was passed; and in another minute the room was cleared.

"Prepare my bed, Bianca. I shall retire as soon as the search is ended," said Masita as she left with the men.

Again I thought of attempting to leave the house, but as if divining my intention, Bianca began to croon her song again; and this time let me know that a man was posted close to the room and others were about the house. I had only to wait and all would be well.

How long I remained hidden I cannot say; but Bianca came at length to tell me that the men had left the house and that Masita wished to see me. She took me to the small room where I had been left on entering the house. It was dimly lighted by only one small lamp carefully shaded so that no rays from it fell on the window.

"How can I thank you?" I said as I entered.

"Do you wish to?"

"I owe you my liberty, and probably my life; and I know the risk at which you have saved me."

"I ask no thanks. Do you think I could betray you after what you have done for me? Besides, I have had my way after all; I have forced you to accept some little help from me in part repayment. All I wish now is to make good the balance and that you will let me help you further. You will remain here to-night, and to-morrow go with me to Trapani as my servant."

I hesitated what reply to make. To refuse her wish after such a service was the act of a churl: and yet I could not consent.

"Surely you will trust me now," she said in some astonishment.

"It is no question of trust or mistrust. Believe that I speak in all sincerity. But I have that to do which must be done before I think of flight."

"Tell me and let me help you in it."

I still hesitated. "You cannot help me," I replied after a pause.

"You mean that you will not be beholden to me."

"Not that indeed, on my honour," I said with quick earnestness.

She made a little gesture of disappointment and then said firmly. "You shall tell me: I am resolved on that or I shall believe you ungrateful."

"That you shall never think. I will tell you. I must find out the truth as to what occurred on the night Vicino was killed."

The intention was so firmly fixed in my mind and appeared so obvious and necessary, that her surprise astonished me.

"Do you mean you do not know?" she asked, her eyes fixed on my face.

"I do not know. It will sound strange and probably incredible to you. But I can recall nothing of my life here in this country until I came to myself after the blow I received that night."

"In this country?" She repeated my words as if not understanding them. "Do you mean that there is a doubt as to how Vicino came by his death?" she asked next, leaning toward me, every feature alight with intent interest. "That he did not die by your hand?"

"I have reason to hope."

She drew back and put her hand to her forehead in thought. "You mystify me," she murmured. "Wait." She rose and left me, to return after a short while with a letter in her hand. She went to a desk and laid out paper and ink and held a pen toward me.

"Will you write as I dictate? You can write?"

"Yes," I said, as I took the pen in hand.

She commenced to dictate a letter to someone unnamed, reading one or two sentences from the paper she held and pausing as she substituted a word here and there for those of the letter. I wrote rapidly, and when I had finished, she took the writing and compared it closely with that of the letter she held. When she had done this she glanced at me with suspicion.

"It is the same. Can you explain this?" she asked somewhat sharply, and put both papers into my hand.

The paper which she had fetched was the letter which had been written to Vicino to bring him to the hut; and the writing was unquestionably my own.

"It is my writing," I said quietly. "I cannot explain it."

"This letter was given to me while I was on the island as part of the proof of your act that night. It was known that I had sworn to accuse you. It was this letter which brought Vicino to his death; and it was your work. How then can you mean there is a doubt?" Her face was pale and set, and the look in her eyes very hard. But with a start the expression changed. "I am not judging you. Heaven knows I would too gladly help you to clear yourself;" and with a deep-drawn sigh he leant back in her chair.

"I have no answer yet. I know, for Beltano himself told me, I had written such a letter; and one also to you, in your brother's name and in a counterfeit of his writing; that you too should be at the hut. I must also have known his intention—to get you to the island that you might become his wife. But I remember nothing of it all—nothing of the time before I awoke to consciousness in the hut."

She made no reply to this, sitting with her hands close pressed to her face.

"It is believed by the men on the island that I killed Vicino; but Breva raised my doubts. He was present and declared that I had been struck while Vicino was still struggling for his life. If that be true—and it is the only foundation for my scanty hopes—it follows that I could not have killed the man."

I saw her shake her head as if unable to believe what I said. A long trying silence followed.

She broke it at length. "I wish to believe what you say. But how is it possible you could have forgotten such a thing?"

"It is as I say. That is why I must refuse your help to fly."

"Do you remember nothing at all before your injury?"

"Nothing of what has ever passed with Beltano and the rest of them."

"But before that? All your life before."

"Of that even to you I cannot speak." I could not. If I had to suffer the penalty for Vicino's death, it must be as Beppo Serrano. The knowledge of my identity must die with me. My shame must not taint those whom I had so disgraced.

Again silence fell between us; and again it was she who broke it, remembering the incident with Murito. "Who are you?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders as if the question were superfluous. "Beppo Serrano, of course," I said.

Her brows knitted and she repeated the little impatient gesture of the hands. Then she shook her head vigorously. "But your English. You speak it so well. You tricked Captain Murito by that. The men to-night told me how he had taken you for an American, although he has been in New York. You are not as the rest of the men on the island. Tell me your history."

"I am Beppo Serrano. That is all my history."

"No, no. Your writing too. It is not that of a peasant."

"I am Beppo Serrano," I repeated. "I can say no more than that until I have learnt the truth about Vicino's death."

"Then there is more to tell; but you feel that you must not trust me."

"It is not fair to put it in that way," I replied when she paused, thinking apparently that the reproach would lead me to speak.

"Then you think it is no more than a woman's idle curiosity; and you will pique me by persisting in this mystery?"

"There is no such thought in my mind; but the matter, call it mystery, or history, or story, as you will, concerns others."

"Molta," she cried, flashing her eyes upon me. "I do not wish to share your confidence with her, indeed."

Our eyes met and she bit her lip and looked down in momentary confusion. My pulses quickened. Was it possible that she could entertain any such jealous irritation as her words implied? Had I so mistaken her concern for my welfare? Or was it, as she herself had hinted, no more than pique.

"I should not withhold from you that which I should tell to another. Molta knows nothing whatever of this."

"It is nothing to me what you tell her, of course," she replied with a shrug. "But as you are to wed her, it is but natural you should confide in her."

"She will never be my wife. That I had ever asked her to wed me was one of the amazing surprises of that night in the hut. When you mentioned her name to me, I had no recollection of having ever heard it before."

"I thought your ignorance that night was mere pretence, and that your offer to help me no more than some new design to injure me. I wronged you. I know that by what you have since done for me. I am sorry."

"You did me no wrong. You could not know, and could but judge by what you had seen of me before. My story is the truth both strange and sad. Who and what I am, you must not ask me; but this I can tell you. Some time ago I was attacked and nearly killed. The injury I received affected my brain and robbed me of all remembrance. In that condition I remained until in the hut that night the blow on my head undid the mischief caused by the former attack; and I came to myself to find that there was



a gap in my life of which I knew nothing. Every act and incident of that interval was covered by an impenetrable veil of ignorance. I did not even know that I was here in Sicily. It was from you I learnt the name by which I was called, who my associates were, and my surroundings. The ignorance you regarded as pretence was real and complete; and you can judge with what horror and fear and loathing I realised what had occurred and the character I bore."

She listened in silence and appeared to be deeply moved by what I said. After a pause of *thor* she asked: "But you remember the past—the past before the first attack, I mean?"

"Everything," I replied, with a smile. "That, however, is part of my trouble, for it seals my lips."

"But why not tell your story?"

"Who would believe it? Here in Sicily, I mean? So far as I have learnt, I have built for myself the reputation of a reckless member of Beltano's band, acting in all respects as such a man would act and crowning everything with the murder for which I am now proscribed. No, I am Beppo Serrano; and in that character must face the task before me."

She sighed and impulsively thrust out her hand. "I believe you."

The compassion in her eyes and the proof of confidence moved me so that I had to struggle to hide the evidence of the love which thrilled my heart. But I did not take the hand she offered. "No. How I welcome that proof of your confidence I cannot tell you. But if I am guilty of that murder I am not fit to touch the hem of your robe. I prefer to die. But if I am innocent, I will never cease my efforts until I have proved it to you, and can take your

hand with the confidence of a man once more able to look the world fearlessly in the face."

The concentrated earnestness of my words and manner appealed to her: and perhaps she read something of the feelings beneath them. She sat for a while with her head lowered and then rose.

"You are right. I will no longer urge you to fly. Had you told me this before, I should not have insulted you with the offer I made. Forget it; but remember if there is any way in which I can help you, I will do it with all I have in the world. With all my strength I shall pray for your success."

Her face was so eloquent of sympathy and compassion that I dared not trust myself to reply, and in silence I followed her from the room.

As I was about to leave the house I asked her if she felt safe against any attempts Beltano might make to get her back to the island.

"The house is strong and I have one or two men servants who would protect me with their lives; but to-morrow I shall take steps which will render any such attempt useless."

"Why not to-night?" I asked, for the thought flashed across my mind that Beltano might be shrewd enough to guess the weakness of the protection and quick to take advantage of it.

"The carabinieri are within call. I have no fear for this one night."

I told her my suspicion in regard to Beltano, and was urging her to take precautions at once, when we heard the noise of a scuffle, the voices of men, and the cries of women; and Bianca came rushing toward us, panic stricken and white of face.

"There are strange men in the house, Excellency," she cried breathlessly. "They forced one of the windows and have overpowered my son and Umberto lies senseless from their blows."

"Are those two the only men you have?" I asked quickly.

"Yes. But you must go. They may be in search of you."

"Send at once for help. It is Beltano's doing. I am sure. You must have the carabinieri instantly."

"But you?" and even as she spoke we heard the footsteps of the men coming in our direction.

## CHAPTER XXII

### MASITA TO THE RESCUE

THAT Masita should think first of me in such a moment of danger for herself was like a miracle to me; but there was no time to waste in sweet thoughts of her consideration.

With the vague idea of getting her out of the house, I hurried her and Bianca into the room in which the meal had been prepared; and it was still on the table. I remembered that there was a second door leading to some other part of the house.

I asked her quickly whether there were means of escape by it, and she told me it led by a second staircase to the kitchens and to a side entrance.

The door was curtained and I was hurrying toward it, when a better plan suggested itself—to let the men believe that Masita was still in the room, leave them to force their way in, and then hold them in check while Masita made her escape from the house.

“But they are not seeking me,” she objected, when I told her. “It is you. They will not dare to attack me in my own house.”

“It is Beltano. I am certain; and he would not look for me here.”

As she still hesitated the door was tried and then someone knocked loudly and called “Signorina! Signorina!”

“It is Drako’s voice,” I whispered. “Answer, that they may know you are here.”

“Who is it?” she called.

“We come to help you.”

"Ask again who it is," I whispered, and overthrew a chair as if Masita had started in alarm. "Go close to the door; and then reply that you don't recognise the voice."

She went to the door. "Who is it?"

A pause followed; and then Drako said: "The carabinieri."

"I don't recognise the voice," replied Masita. "And I do not need help."

"Now go, and leave the rest to me," I whispered.

Bianca was already at the other door trembling in fear.

"Come, Excellency," she urged. "What he says is right."

"You must come too," said Masita to me.

"To the police?" I exclaimed in English, that Bianca should not understand. "Go at once, for Heaven's sake. I will keep them from following; and can return to the island with them much more safely than if I had to go alone."

"Come, Excellency," urged Bianca again.

Masita still hesitated. "It will soon be too late," I whispered, as the knocks and calls were repeated impatiently. "Do not return without enough men to protect the house."

"But that will betray you also," she cried in perplexity.

"I will get these men away before you return, and go with them."

She gave me a last glance and throwing up her hands went out with Bianca.

As soon as I was alone, I thrust a chair against the door as if intending to barricade it and made sufficient noise to lead them to believe that Masita was still in the room and had taken alarm.

This had the effect I desired. Someone flung himself against the door, seeking to break it in. It was stout enough to resist the attempt; and I lit a couple more lamps

and waited, close to the curtained door, while they forced their way in.

Drako was the first to enter, followed by Ahmet, Luigi, and another.

"Beppo!" they cried in astonishment.

"Yes, Beppo," I answered with a laugh. "Didn't you recognise my voice?"

"Where is the signorina?" asked Drako.

With a movement of my foot, unseen by them, I made the curtain move. "She is not here," I said, and glanced at the curtain as if in some alarm.

Drako at once took the bait. "She is there," he declared, pointing to the curtain.

"Do you mean that I lie, Drako?"

"I saw the curtain move," he replied. "Didn't you, Ahmet?"

"I made it move, fool;" and this time I kicked it openly.

He took this for a further ruse, just as I wished. He was a fool, as I knew, for all his cunning. "Thrust it aside altogether and show us," he said.

"Come and do it yourself, Drako;" and I laughed with a suggestion of unpleasant consequences if he accepted the invitation.

"She is there," he growled, turning to the others.

"What is the meaning of this, Beppo?" asked Ahmet.

"That's exactly what I want to know."

"Beltano sent us here to protect the signorina."

"You mean that is the message you were to give her. How were you to do it? By taking her back to the island?"

"We mean to give the message ourselves."

"Well, I tell you she isn't here, man. You can wait for

her. Have some supper in the meantime. There's some excellent wine there."

"Don't try and play with us in this way," he said angrily.

"Look about the room for her then. It is easily searched."

"She's hidden behind that curtain," put in Drako.

"I'll answer that she is not hidden there and you can look everywhere else. But the man who tries to look there will reckon with me first," and I put myself directly in front of it.

I had to cause as much delay as possible before letting them know that Masita had escaped and gone for help; but had also to gauge the time so that we should all be able to get away before her return with the carabinieri.

My conduct baffled him. I knew Luigi was friendly and that Ahmet, while set upon obeying Beltano, would hesitate before resorting to any extremes. Drako was vicious, but afraid of me; and the fourth fellow I ignored. He would just follow the lead of the others.

"We don't want to have any trouble, Beppo," said Ahmet after a pause.

"Then don't make any. Let's talk it over," and while keeping a sharp watch on them all, I rolled a cigarette and lighted it.

"We have to obey Beltano's orders. You know that."

"Stop over there, Ahmet," I said quickly, as he made a step in my direction. "We can talk just as well. What are his orders?"

"She has to go back with us."

"Well, she isn't going."

"Are you going to fight the lot of us?" cried Drako with a snarl of a laugh.

I seized the chance of wasting a little more time in making

a personal quarrel of his interruption and for a minute or more poured out a string of invectives and threats goading him to reply, until Ahmet intervened and silenced him.

"What are you going to do, Beppo?" he asked then.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Stop this business and give up the signorina to us."

"I'm not going to do anything of the sort, Ahmet. I brought the signorina away from the island and she is not going back."

"We are going to take her back; and if you make trouble the consequences will be ugly for you."

"I'll take my chance of that. I've told you she isn't here in this room; and I don't believe she is anywhere in the house. But anyway I took the risk of getting her out of Beltano's hands; and I'm going to take the risk of keeping her out so long as I can. You know the corner I'm in. If I stay here on the mainland, the carabinieri will catch me and my life will be as good as ended; and if I return to the island Beltano will see that it isn't worth more there. It may as well go one way as another; and for choice I'd rather lose it in a scrap with you. I'm better armed than any of you, however; and if you mean to try force in this thing now, you must. But my back's to the wall," and with that I tossed away the cigarette and slipped my hand into the pocket where I had my revolver.

"Don't be a fool, man. The girl's nothing to you," he replied. "You can't fight four of us," and again he stepped toward me.

Drako sneered and drew his knife as he followed Ahmet.

Quick as thought I drew my weapon and fired at him. The bullet shattered the knife and ripped one of his fingers. With a yell of pain and fear he jumped back; and Ahmet stopped.

"There are still five chambers loaded, Ahmet. You'd



better let them remain so," I said very quietly. "But the man who tries to draw a weapon or to leave the room will get the next; and it won't be in the hand next time."

The incident had a very cooling effect even upon the Turk; and for some moments there was silence in the room.

In the pause I heard the sound of movements somewhere in the house. Evidently Masita had returned. It was time to go.

"You let Drako fool you, Ahmet," I said and swung back the curtain which concealed the door. "The signorina was here, but left by that door. She went to get the help of the carabinieri, who are close at hand; and I can hear that she has returned."

An exclamation of rage burst from him and a cry of fear from the Greek.

"You have betrayed us then," said Ahmet fiercely.

"I have saved the signorina; but as for betraying you, who has most to fear from the carabinieri, you or I?"

"You shall pay for this," he cried, his face livid with rage.

"If you come another step I shall fire, Ahmet," I said sternly, seeing that he was going to attack me.

He held back for a moment before my levelled weapon; but the next instant he rushed forward to seize my arm.

I fired and the bullet crashed into his right arm. But he gripped my weapon with his left and called to the rest to seize me. Luigi did not move; but it was fortunate for me that I had before smashed Drako's knife or I should have had a short shrift, for he snatched up one from the table and tried to thrust it into my heart. The aim was good, but the knife useless. It snapped off short; and as he drew back, I gave him a kick which put him out of action.

Luigi prevented the fourth man from taking a hand in

the affair; and thus Ahmet and I were left to settle the thing between us. He was a fellow of great strength; but handicapped by his broken arm he failed to overpower me; and we were struggling in close grips for the possession of the revolver when the door behind us was opened and Masita entered with one of her men, who levelled the carbine he carried at Ahmet's head.

He ceased the struggle immediately, but kept his hold on the revolver, and faced the death which threatened him with the stony impassiveness of his race.

For a few seconds there was dead silence.

Masita looked magnificent in the moment of her triumph. Drawn to her full height, her shapely head thrown proudly back, her cheeks flushed and bosom heaving in her anger, her nostrils dilated with her quickly coming breath, and her lip curling in contemptuous scorn, she glanced from one to the other of the disconcerted men.

A disdainful laugh from her broke the silence.

That she should have returned so quickly perplexed me as much as the fact that she had come without more help than the one servant. I seized the moment of confusion therefore to drag my weapon from Ahmet's grip and stepped a couple of paces from him.

The action appeared to rouse him. His expression changed and I saw him glance at her with some fresh thought; and from her to the other three. They were still four to two, for wounded though he was, he was more than a match for the slim young fellow at Masita's side. And he was utterly reckless of his life.

Masita was watching him closely and was quick to read his thoughts.

But the rest were too overpowered by surprise to pay heed to him. Luigi was sitting at the table with his hand to his

face, and Drako was stealing to the door to escape with the other fellow close at his heels.

"Stop, Drako," called Ahmet.

The two men turned together and looked round at the Turk; and Luigi rose.

I was still at a loss to understand the position. It flashed across my mind that Masita had not really left the house, and that, out of fear for my arrest if she brought the carabinieri there, she had merely released her servants and with no more than this scanty assistance had returned to see how matters had gone with me. That she should have dared such a risk for my sake at once delighted me and yet filled me with new fears for her.

"If that man moves you will shoot him," said Masita to her servant.

Ahmet smiled. "Are we all to be scared by a woman and a boy?" he asked the others; and I saw his hand steal to his knife.

I stepped back hastily toward Masita.

But at that moment she showed her plan.

"Do you think I am mad?" she said to me. "Bianca!" she called loudly.

Again there was a pause; and in the silence we heard the stamping of heavy feet and the clash of arms.

A command was uttered in a loud raucous voice, followed by the grounding of guns.

The carabinieri were below; and heedless of the consequences to myself, I breathed a sign of thankfulness that she was safe.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### BACK TO THE ISLAND

THE knowledge that the carabinieri were in the house ended all thought of any further attack. With a tightening of the muscles Ahmet resumed his former attitude of impassive unconcern; Drako, in quick fear for his skin, rushed out of the room, followed by the fellow who had kept close by him all the time, and Luigi lingered by the door and looked across as if anxious for me to leave with him.

"Put up your weapon," said Masita to her servant, touching him on the shoulder. "Stand at the head of the stairs there ready to call up the carabinieri at a word from me."

He showed some reluctance to obey the order, and kept his eyes fixed on Ahmet as he slowly backed through the door. Ahmet then glanced suspiciously from Masita to me and back to her and uttered a single exclamation of disgust.

"You can go if you wish to save yourself," said Masita to him.

He regarded her steadily, and his dark stern face relaxed for a moment in a slow meaning smile. "We are fools and have been tricked by a woman's wit. Come, Luigi," and with that he walked slowly to the door.

"I am going to the island with you," I said as they left the room. "You will be safe now," I added to Masita. "Can you keep the carabinieri from pursuing us?"

She looked at me with an expression I did not understand. "There will be no pursuit," she answered with a smile.

"Do they not know I am here?"

"Do you think I should tell them?"

"I don't understand," I exclaimed in perplexity.

"Ask Ahmet. He understood when it was too late."

The meaning of it began to dawn on me then. "Do you mean that after all you did not bring——"

"There are no carabinieri in the house."

"But the men we heard below there?"

"Bianca and old Giacomo. There is no one else. It was a trick. I released Giacomo and his son and armed them. It was his voice you heard, and he and Bianca made the noise of the grounding of guns."

"But the risk! It was madness!" I cried.

"I had no choice. To have brought the carabinieri would have meant your arrest. Rather than that I would have returned to the island."

"I have no words to thank you," I replied, dumfounded in my wonder at her courage. "But they may return."

"Ahmet is disabled; Drako and the other are cowards; and Luigi is your friend. They will not venture here again. Besides, I have already sent for help to come at once."

"Let me make sure that they have indeed left the house."

"There is no need. We shall not be taken again by surprise, and both Giacomo and his son would shed their blood in my defence."

But I insisted upon going round the house to make sure the men had gone, and did not leave until I had satisfied myself that she could safely be left until help arrived.

"You have saved me twice to-night," she said, as I was about to set out. "You will at least let me thank you," and she held out her hand.

But again I drew back. "I am not worthy, signorina."

"Is not that for me to judge, and have I not heard your story?"

"I am not yet worthy, signorina. If I live to tell you the end of it, then perhaps I may take your hand. But not yet."

"Heaven grant it may end as I would have it!"

And with these earnest words ringing in my ears, and more moved than ever before in my life, I set off after Ahmet and his companions.

I chose the path by which she guided me to the house and by the horses I found Luigi waiting. "I thought you would come this way, Beppo, and waited to dissuade you from returning to the island."

"You can't do that, Luigi."

"There will be hell in Beltano's heart after this business to-night. He was like a madman when he learnt the trick you had played him."

"Where is he?"

"He crossed with us; but a messenger from the Count met him at Solferino's and he ordered us to come on here, saying that he would follow. He will have your life if you go back."

"A man can only die once. If I stay here there is worse—imprisonment for life," and I mounted.

"But you could escape across the hills to Trapani," he urged, as he rode after me.

"I am going back to the island, Luigi."

"You are mad, then, as I say, or tired of your life."

"On the contrary, I was never saner; never more anxious to live. I have a purpose."

"Tell me."

"Later on, perhaps; but not yet. Where is Ahmet?"

"Ridden on. He does not believe you are coming. He

is mad against Drako for having bolted as he did, and declares that we were only fooled by Masita, and that she had no one in the house save her servants."

"Let him return and see," I replied drily. "Come, let us get after him."

We rode at a good speed, and just before reaching Solferino's overtook Ahmet, who was nursing his injured arm.

"How is it between us, Ahmet?" I asked, riding up to him.

"How should it be?"

"You bear me malice for that hurt to your arm?"

But that was not his way. "Why should I bear malice? 'Twas in fair fight. I should have done as much to you or more had the thing gone otherwise; and should have done as you did had I been in your place."

"Good!" I said, and offered him my hand.

He took it with his left. "She was worth fighting for, Beppo; and another time Beltano must send someone else in my place on such an errand. She fooled us cleverly; and for the moment even I believed she had those men in the house."

"The place is full of them," I replied. I did not wish him or anyone to think that Masita was without protection.

But he shook his head. "Now, perhaps. But had that fool, Drako, had as much courage as a mouse there would have been another story to carry back to Beltano."

"There would not have been so many to carry it, Ahmet."

"By my father's tomb, that is nothing but the truth." He was silent for a few seconds, and then with a dry laugh added: "If I bore you malice, Beppo, I should be chuckling at your folly in coming back with us. I didn't believe you would dream of it."

"I have done what I planned to do and shall not run from the consequences. Are you for or against me?"

"I have never been against you; and had I known that you were at the house there, I would not have gone."

"And if Beltano is set upon my death, what then?"

"He is my leader, not I his, Beppo," he replied bluntly; and I questioned him no more.

At Solferino's we were told that Beltano had left orders that we were to lose no time in returning to the island; but I did not learn whether he himself had gone there or not.

Drako was waiting in the boat; and the instant Ahmet saw him he uttered a cry of rage and, catching him by the throat, shook him like a rat in his powerful left hand and flung him headlong into the bows with a contemptuous curse at his cowardice.

As soon as we were well under weigh Luigi came and began to question me about what I meant to do on landing. He had heard my talk with Ahmet and declared that although the Turk might obey Beltano without question, there were many on the island who would not. Giuseppe had enemies among the men; my fight with him had made those my friends, and he thought they would probably stand by me in any trouble.

"They have always been against his marrying Molta, Beppo, and will not have him as leader," he added. "Some of them are also against Beltano's marrying Masita. They side with Agapa and resent his treatment of her. If you can make your peace with Molta, therefore, all may yet be well."

But this was precisely what I did not mean to do. All the deceit of that pretended lovemaking had become a thousand times more hateful than before, and I would not stoop to lie to her in order to escape her brother's anger. I did



not tell Luigi this; but put him off with some general reply and said that I wished to be left alone to think.

On one point I was absolutely resolved: I would not speak one word nor commit a single act dishonouring the motive which inspired my love for Masita. I recalled with a thrill of delight the change in her manner toward me; the sweet solicitude she had shown, the light of compassion in her eyes, the risks she had faced to secure my safety, the desire for my confidence, the trust she had placed in me; all these were as the sun's brilliance breaking through the gloomy mist of my troubled thoughts.

It was because of her and of the wild hope of winning her that I had faced the hazard of returning to the island—that I might obtain the proofs of my innocence and so render myself worthy of her. And what I had to do should be done without the stain of lies and deceit.

Had it not been for this love of mine for Masita, my course would have been plain enough—to fly the country. In the disguise she had offered me, I could have reached Trapani in safety; a few hours would have seen me in Naples or Rome as Cuthbert Dalrymple; Beppo Serrano would have been no more than a myth; and all that chapter of my life would have closed for ever.

And when the light on the island flashed into view, I had some misgiving whether after all I had not taken the wrong course; and whether it would not have been much wiser to have used the influence and money which would have been at my command to set others to discover the truth about Vicino's death.

If Beltano had already returned to the island, I should have to face a crisis at once. There would be no time to act upon Luigi's well-meant advice and try to win Giuseppe's enemies to my side. And when we approached the

landing stage, my heart quickened its beat as I tried to make out Beltano's figure among those who were awaiting us.

I could not see him; and presently out of the darkness came Molta's voice from the beach. "Are you there, Carlo?" I gave a sigh of relief and thankfulness.

Ahmet answered her. "No, Molta. We thought he had returned."

As I stepped ashore she saw me. "Beppo!" she cried in astonishment.

"Yes, Beppo," I said quietly.

"I marvel you dare let us see your face again," she replied, surprise changing quickly to anger.

"The dog of a traitor," exclaimed Giuseppe, taking his cue from her anger; and one or two of those near him echoed the words with muttered execrations and threats.

It was an ominous reception in all truth.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### MOLTA'S WARNING

THERE are moments when it is sheer foolishness to count risks; and that was one of them for me.

I went right up to Giuseppe. "Say that again, Giuseppe, if you dare."

He gave way a step and drew his knife, the others following his example as they closed up to his side.

"You are a traitor, you dog," he repeated, encouraged by the promise of the support of his friends.

Hot with rage and heedless of the others' uplifted knives, I sprung at him before the words were well out of his mouth, and caught his right hand in my left as he was in the act of rushing at me, dragged him forward before the rest had time to strike, and levelled my revolver at them.

"Stand back!" I called loudly, "and leave us two to settle this for ourselves."

My old reputation stood in good stead. They slunk back, murmuring and muttering, but cowed by my weapon.

Turning then on Giuseppe I thrust the revolver against his head. "Drop that knife and eat your words or you'll eat nothing else in this world." I growled with a fierce oath.

He let it fall on the instant and then Molta intervened.

"Are you going to do murder the moment you come here?" she cried.

"This is between Giuseppe and me. No man on this island shall call me a traitor. That I swear. Come, Giuseppe."

Molta on that attempted to seize my pistol; but I pre-

vented her and twisted Giuseppe round so that he stood between me and her.

"Don't kill him, Beppo," she said.

"I'll kill any man who utters that lie about me."

Believing that his life was in peril, Giuseppe mumbled something about not having meant what he said.

"Louder, so that all may hear," I cried sternly. "Confess you lied."

He was too frightened to disobey. "I am sorry. You are no traitor, Beppo. I lied when I said it," he said in a loud voice; and with that I thrust him away violently and went up the path straight to my hut.

There would be no more trouble that night, I was convinced; but I barred my door and, placing my revolver under my pillow, slept soundly.

In the morning Agapa brought me my breakfast and was full of curiosity as to what had passed on the mainland. As I knew that she would repeat what I said to the others, I was careful to make it clear that I had been nowhere except to Masita's house, and for her benefit I laid stress on the fact that Masita was now safe and would not return to the island.

She questioned me closely about this; and a couple of hours later I understood the reason for her eager curiosity. Assured that Masita would not return, she forced a quarrel with Julius, in which she told him bluntly that she had only been fooling him at Beltano's bidding; that he was as dirt in her eyes; a coward and a drunkard and worse, and must leave the island at once. And when the poor fool protested, she called Drako to help her, on which the lad fled like a scared sheep from a wolf.

I saw her purpose; and was not sorry for it. She had resolved to assert her right; and thus on his return Beltano

would find other trouble to worry about besides that with me.

I was returning to my hut after the excitement caused by the scene when Breva joined me. I asked him how matters had gone after I had left with Masita, and whether Beltano had suspected him of having helped me.

"At first he did. I thought he would have killed me on the spot," he said. "I have never seen him in such a fury. Had you not left your knife in the room to prove you had been there he would never have believed me. But you were surely insane to come back."

I told him the reason—to get the truth as to Vicino's death—and that it was more to me than my life. We discussed the matter at length and he told me over again all that he knew of that night's doings. "I am positive you were struck before Vicino was killed," he declared. "It was either Giuseppe or Drako or both; but how can you force either of them to admit it?"

I repeated what Luigi had told me about the friendliness of the men who were hostile to Giuseppe, and suggested that they would not only stand by me against Beltano, but help to get the truth about Vicino's death.

But he shook his head. "They are more afraid of Beltano than of you, Beppo, and would not dare to disobey him. Nor could they help against Giuseppe. You will never learn the truth; and your only chance is to fly before Beltano returns. He will have your life for this, and no one will dare to stop him. Before he went after you, indeed, he called the men together and denounced you as a traitor and promised a reward to anyone who killed you if you returned. Flight is your only chance."

"That was the meaning of the scene last night, then. I do not fear them."

"You can at least take one precaution. Leave this place and go to the old fort. Pepita and I will secretly carry there a store of provisions."

It was both a shrewd and kindly forethought, and I thanked him for it, and resolved to do as he said.

I was busy with the few preparations I had to make, when I saw Molta coming from the farmstead in the direction of my hut. Her black looks were storm signals which were easy to read; and as I could not avoid the interview I deemed it best to appear to court it. So I rose and went to meet her.

"We must have an understanding, Beppo," she said without any word of greeting. "I have the right to demand an explanation, of course."

"Of what?"

"Of your conduct. What else? I am not the woman to be lightly spurned and tricked as you have spurned and tricked me."

"I have not spurned you."

"Did you not send Carlo to me with a lie that you wished to be reconciled and that you were ready to let things be between us as they had been; and didn't you tell that lie in order to get Masita away?"

"Yes. But that was not tricking or spurning you. It was Beltano I tricked."

"But it was about me you lied," she retorted fiercely. "It was my name you dared to play with, and my love for you. And for the sake of another woman! When I think of it my blood is like fire."

"On my word I intended no insult to you nor to make light of any feeling you have for me."

"Why have you come back?" she asked with an angry toss of the head, as if repudiating my explanation. "Is it

for that woman's sake? Have you still some purpose to serve for her?"

"I have come back for my own purpose, Molta; but what that is I will keep to myself. This matter of Masita is between Beltano and me only. I told him I would be no party to forcing her to wed him and it was——"

"What is she to you?" she burst in vehemently.

"If you will not listen to me, why ask an explanation?"

"What is she to you?" she repeated, even more angrily.

"She was to me a woman in distress and I helped her. She——"

"Don't lie to me. You love her. That is why you helped her. Are you afraid to own it?"

"I have not lied to you, Molta."

"You are lying now. You do love her, and you are afraid to own it to my face. You lied to Carlo when you said you wished to be reconciled with me; and if you would lie to him, you would lie to me now. You do love her."

"My patience is out. Think what you will," I said angrily and turned away.

She caught my arm and stayed me. "You shall not go in that way. You shall answer me. It is not safe to play with me. The men here are clamouring for your life; Carlo has decreed your death; and there is but one way in which you can be saved; I will send for a priest so that Carlo shall find we are wedded when he returns. But if you have let that woman win your heart from me, you shall die."

"I have no other answer," I repeated bluntly as I shook off her hold and returned to my hut.

But the incident had far greater results than I had expected. As she clung to my arm we had been seen; and the

news spread like a fire among the others, that Molta and I were reconciled.

I heard of it first from Luigi, who plumed himself upon the fact that he had counselled it, and congratulated me upon having taken the advice so promptly. "It will save your life, Beppo. Molta will not let Beltano harm you now. I am as glad as are some of the others."

Agapa said much the same; but added a warning. "Giuseppe will but hate you the more. Be on your guard. There is trouble brewing; or I know nothing of him or of those with him."

I let them talk as they would and held my own counsel. And that afternoon I carried my few belongings to the old fort. For the rest of that day and the next I held aloof from Molta, mingling with the men at their work in the fields and trying to glean some of the information I desired so keenly.

I could learn nothing of any moment; and on returning to the fort in the evening, dispirited and depressed at my failure, I found Molta awaiting me.

"I have not come in anger, Beppo," she said, seeing by my look that she was not welcome.

"What is it you wish?"

"You have shunned me these two days."

"What is it?" I repeated.

"I have a thousand fears for you. You are in danger. I have come to warn you. I was mad when we parted—mad with rage and jealousy. But it is not too late to undo the mischief."

"I am armed and can protect myself."

"Oh God, how can you look so coldly at me! You will kill me, Beppo. And I have but come to warn you there is a plot against your life—to take it this very night."



"How do you know this?" I asked, doubting her.

"Heaven forgive me, I have been a party to it."

"How can that be, when there is common talk that you and I are reconciled?"

"I spoke only with Giuseppe. I cast my voice against you," she replied slowly, her face paling and her eyes falling before mine. "But I have rued, Beppo. I cannot bear that you should die. They will come to-night when you sleep, Giuseppe and Drako, by the cliff where the path has been hewn and made easy."

"Giuseppe again," I murmured.

"They are both set on your death because of your——" She paused and looked up, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"Because you let him make love to you and he thought to wed you, I know."

"But more because of Vicino's death, Beppo."

With an effort I repressed the excitement with which I heard this. "Does he deem me a cur like himself that I should tell what I know of that?" I asked with a sneer.

"You do know, then, that it was he who killed Vicino?"

"Was I not there? How did you learn it?"

"From himself. When you were ill, you bade me find out the truth from him."

"And for his sake you have kept his secret and saved him from me on the night of my return. He should be grateful to you."

I intended no more by this sneer than to prevent her seeing that I had learnt the news for the first time. I was thus utterly surprised by the effect of the words.

She rushed to me and seized my arms, staring up into my face with a strange light in her eyes, and then with a sudden and half hysterical laugh she let her head fall on my shoulder.

"Do you really believe I should have cared had you killed him?"

I saw then she had mistaken my sneer for a sign of jealousy. I took her wrists to put her away from me; and again she mistook my purpose. She let her hands slip into mine and glanced up with a smile.

"You are jealous, Beppo. And so I have been. Oh, how I have suffered, dearest. But I do not really believe you care for Masita. Forgive me. I cannot live without you. The days of our quarrel have been more dark and drear than any in my life. My heart was nearly broken. I will never anger you again; never, in all my life, if you will but love me. I love you so. I do, I do, with all my soul and being. When I thought I had lost you, I could have killed myself. You will understand now. Your jealous thought about me and Giuseppe will shew you. He is less than nothing to me. I swear that to you. Oh, God, this reasonless jealousy. Don't let it part us, Beppo; my Beppo, always mine. Whisper that to me, dearest," and she clung to me and gazed into my eyes as if hungering for the assurance which I could not give her.

Of all the embarrassments of that time, none was more disconcerting than this. That she cared for me I could not doubt; and I knew that in the days of my lost self I had wooed her passionately and with vows of love! For that I owed such amends as it was in my power to make; and there was but one course I could take. I must tell her the truth.

Her anger I could have faced without caring; but this avowal, spoken with emotional earnestness and with all the evidence of intense sincerity, appealed to every instinct of chivalry in my nature.

My silence perplexed and disturbed her. "It is because

of my great love that I have warned you, Beppo," she said at length. "But you chill me with that look. It is so strange, so loveless. Is there still trouble between us?"

Her voice, low and sorrow-toned, sank almost to a whisper, and the yearning misery in her white, drawn features and shrinking attitude was a thousand times harder to witness than all her fury had been.

Feeling the grip of my hands relax, she withdrew her own with a weary sigh and stood back a pace, her eyes wide in questioning fear and her breath labouring as she waited for the words I found so difficult to speak.

## CHAPTER XXV

### A MURDER PLOT

"HAVE you no answer for me, Beppo?" asked Molta, finding the suspense intolerable. "Have I humbled myself in vain? What else can I do? Mother of Heaven, what else to appease your anger?"

"I am not silent from anger, Molta."

"Then you will not be reconciled? Ah, you don't, you can't mean that?"

"That will be for you to say when you have heard me."

"As if my heart were not withering for it?" she cried, smiling. She stepped toward me again impulsively, but paused midway as our eyes met. "I can't understand you," she added distractedly, pressing her hands to her bosom. "I have sought to undo the wrong I did you."

"It is I who have wronged you, not you me, and the time has come when you must know the truth."

"The truth?" she murmured. "Do you mean—about—about Masita?"

"About myself, rather. You remember when I lay ill that I told you I had forgotten everything before the moment I was struck. You could not credit it; but it was true. I had forgotten everything—everything. Some time before that I had received a similar injury; and my mind was an absolute blank about everything which had occurred in the interval."

"It is impossible," she cried.

"It is the absolute truth, Molta, on my oath."

She bent forward and looked intently at me. "You mean you had forgotten even me—even me?"

"Your very name was unknown to me; and Beltano's and the rest, and all that had passed since I came here. I know not how I came; and remember nothing since I received the first injury thousands of miles from here."

She was silent, as if unable to credit my words. "Why do you tell me this?"

"Because it was in that interval of my lost self that I sought and gained your love. That is part of the wrong I did you; and the truth is the only reparation I can make."

"Reparation!" she cried scornfully, her anger beginning once more to rise. "You did not tell me when you were ill; but left me to believe you still loved me. Were you acting lies then, or are you telling them now?"

"That is the other and perhaps the greater part of my wrong; and for that I can only ask your forgiveness. I was stunned and bewildered by the position in which I found myself. My life was in peril for the deed I feared I had committed. I was ill and weak from the effects of my injury; and I——"

"You wished to save Masita," she broke in angrily.

"Yes. I wished to save Masita; and wished also to find out the truth about Vicino's death."

"And so you tricked and used me for your purposes. You knew that you had won my love; you spoke glibly of our marriage; you even told Beltano that you wished to be reconciled. And it was all lies, lies, lies. My God, I shall go mad."

She pressed her hands to her head and paced up and down in a frenzy of rage and indignation. But all suddenly she turned and seized my arms and peered into my face. "But you did win my love, Beppo. You know that.

All the island knows it. I am ready to forgive you. As Heaven is my judge, I will forget all you have told me. I cannot live without you, Beppo. I cannot. You made me love you. You will not break my heart? Oh, you cannot be so cruel! Say that you love me, dearest. It is all that I wish for in life. I swear that on my soul. I will save you from Carlo's anger. You do love me. You do. You must. You said it depended upon me whether we should be reconciled when I had heard you. Let my wish decide that. Of course I wish it. You wish it too, don't you? You will marry me, Beppo?"

"While I am held to be Vicino's murderer I am not fit to marry any woman, Molta."

"But I can and will clear you from that charge, Beppo," she cried eagerly. "Only make me your wife."

I took her hands and held them. "It is impossible, Molta. There are circumstances in my life——"

"It is Masita," she exclaimed with renewed passion, as she snatched her hands away. "She has won you from me. It was only when you had seen her that you changed toward me. I don't believe your story. You love her, and would fling me aside to put her in my place. But you shall never wed her. That I swear. I am no tame fool to be played with in this way. You will turn my love to hate, Beppo; hate of you and of her; and both of you shall suffer. You dream perhaps that you can save her from my anger. But you cannot. Go through with this; spurn me and cheat me if you dare. It will cost you your life. You know that; and then I will find the means to deal with the woman who has dealt thus with me."

"I have not sought to put Masita, or anyone, in your place, Molta. My lips have never uttered a word to Masita that even you could not have heard——"

"Lips! Words! Why mock me with such lies? Do you love her? Can you deny that?" she asked fiercely.

"I have told you all this because——"

"Do you love Masita?" she broke in; "if you did not, you would say so, because your life, aye, and hers too, hangs on the answer. But you cannot." She turned away for a moment, pressing her hands to her bosom as if overcome with emotion. Then she looked round. "Stay, I will put another question." She came up close to me holding my eyes with hers and laid her left hand on my arm. "If you love her——" she began, and, raising her right hand suddenly, struck at me with a stiletto which she had drawn while her back was toward me.

The attempt failed; but only by the narrowest margin; for she took me so completely by surprise that I had no time in which to attempt to save myself. But her left hand had tightened so strenuously upon my arm that my instinctive start turned her lithe body so that the blow, aimed at my heart, went wide and fell between my arm and side, doing no more injury than a rent in the sleeve.

I caught her wrist before she could raise it again; and as soon as she saw that she had failed, she dropped the dagger, wrenched her hand free, and rushed away, uttering an emotional cry; but whether of rage against me, dismay at her frenzied act, or regret for her failure, I know not.

I picked up the stiletto, and went into the old fort. The thing had shaken me up, for I had been very near to death, and when I reached the room on the floor above—I was using that which had been prepared for Masita—I sat down to steady my nerves and collect my thoughts.

The result of the avowal had been even worse than I had anticipated. I had had half a hope that when Molta knew the true cause of the change in me toward her, she

would be reasonable enough to acquit me of the intention to deceive her, and that some sort of peace would be patched up.

But in that I had only fooled myself. She had not believed my story, and her insensate jealousy had blinded her to everything except the object of it—Masita. Quixotism had proved a bad policy; and in my bitter recognition of the fact, I was half disposed to regret that I had been fool enough to tell the truth. It would have been much safer to have gone on with the deceit. As it was, I had considerably increased the dangers of my position.

It was true that she could have saved me from Beltano's wrath; while now she would be among the loudest to demand my death; and she would hound on Giuseppe and—— But at that moment I recalled what she had said about him and the attack he was planning for that night.

In the stress of other feelings, I had forgotten that; and forgotten also what she had told me about his having killed Vicino. In quarrelling with her, I had thus not only turned her from friend to enemy, but had also destroyed the means of proving my innocence.

It was indeed a heavy price to pay for the luxury of telling the truth.

She would warn him at once of course that she had put me on my guard; and although for that night my life would be safe enough, it would mean no more than a postponement of the danger until some more favourable opportunity offered, or at latest until Beltano's return.

At that my thoughts went back to the idea I had once before entertained—to abandon the plan of seeking the proof of Giuseppe's guilt on the island and to fly to Naples or Rome, resume my own name, and set others to discover the truth.



So far as I could see, there was no other course left. If I waited for Beltano's arrival, it would mean the end of all things for me. Molta would see to that; and goaded by her, he would act as soon as he set foot on the island. If I was to get away, it must be done at once, before Molta had time to guess my purpose and take steps to frustrate it.

I decided to leave that night; and promptly set about such preparations as I had to make.

Taking off the clothes I was wearing, I tossed them on the bed, and put on those which I had worn on the night when I had passed for an American with Murito. They were less outlandish than those I usually wore and less likely to attract attention to me as a peasant. Then I loaded the empty chambers of my revolver and put some spare cartridges in my pocket.

I had sufficient money to carry me as far as Rome. I had found this in my old hut; but where it had come from of course I could not know. And as I could not say when I should get my next meal, I made a hearty one, and then lay down to wait until I knew the men would be in their beds.

I did not close my eyes but lay thinking over the parlous mess in which I was involved and speculating uneasily upon the chances of escape; and I had rested for about an hour when I heard a sound somewhere in the building.

I lay as still as sleep and listened, straining my ears for any repetition of the noise. It was louder next time. Something fell on the floor of one of the adjoining rooms, and a whispered "Hush!" followed.

In a flash I guessed the meaning of it.

For some reason Molta had failed to warn Giuseppe that I knew of his plan against me; or she had been cunning enough to think I should conclude she would tell him and

so be off my guard. She had been right, too, for I had given up all thought of the attempt, and had it not been that I had formed the fresh plan of escaping at once, I should have been asleep.

Instinctively I slipped off the bed and arranged the clothes I had cast off so that they might be mistaken for my sleeping form, and stole across the room and concealed myself in a spot where I could give any intruder a very different welcome from that he expected.

The moon was up, and the light streaming through the windows was sufficient to enable me to see anyone who entered and all that occurred; while at the same time it intensified the dark shadows in a manner likely to disconcert anyone who came fresh into the room from outside.

It was in one of these shadows that the bed stood, just beyond the sheen of light cast by the moon's rays.

Molta had said that Giuseppe and Drako were to make the attempt, and I had long enough to wait to have time to form some rough sort of plan. Reckoning upon the advantage of surprise, they would probably feel quite confident of success; and although that advantage would now be on my side, I was not rash enough to think of risking a fight against them both in the dark at such close quarters.

Then another thought came to me. If I could get Giuseppe into my power, I could force him to make a confession of Vicino's murder. And I began to shape my plans with that in view.

Drako was a sorry coward, I knew. Willing at any time to give a stab in the back when there was no danger, he would think first and always of his own skin and would bolt at the first sign of danger. A shot fired in the air or even a sudden blow dealt unexpectedly from out of the darkness would send him flying like a rabbit.

I did not wish to kill the brute, and would only do that if no other course were possible. But I would have Giuseppe at any cost; and if to secure him I had to shoot his companion, I would do it without compunction. He was set on killing me; and in that desperate game he who loses pays.

While these thoughts were flashing through my head I was listening intently for any sound to tell me that the men were coming to the room. After the slight noise they made—probably on getting through the window—they remained absolutely still, to reassure themselves that I had not heard it.

So long did this dead stillness last indeed that I began to feel impatient for their coming, and half disposed to fear that they had abandoned the attempt. Now that I was prepared for them and saw a means of dragging the truth from Giuseppe, I was positively eager for them to come. Instead of menacing danger, the attack opened the path of hope.

At last I heard a movement. They were creeping toward the room stealthily, almost noiselessly, save that now and again their clothes brushed against the wall of the narrow passage.

Then a hand touched the door, which stood ajar, and I saw it give inch by inch as it was gently pushed open enough to admit them.

At that moment I breathed heavily as if in sleep. Again all was still as the grave.

After a few seconds a whisper passed, and by that I knew that there were at least two of them. Presently the door was pushed wider, and a man glided through it and paused an instant, peering intently toward the bed.

I was right. It was Giuseppe.

I held my breath, and my fingers tightened on my revolver as I waited to see who was with him.

Almost immediately afterwards Drako's evil sinister face shewed. Like the coward he was, he lagged a pace or two behind his bolder companion.

The moment for me to act had come.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE CONFESSION

THE spot which I had chosen was some few feet behind the door, so that when Giuseppe and Drako entered, their backs were toward me. I was crouched against the wall by the side of a tall wooden settle, which would have prevented them from seeing me had they looked round.

But they had no suspicion that I was not on the bed. This stood against the wall opposite the door, with the table between them and it. The wide shaft of brilliant moonlight streamed full on the table, on which were the remains of the meal I had recently made; and as the bed was in the shadow, the light hindered rather than aided them, because it deepened the gloom over the bed and rendered it the more difficult for them to detect the trick I had played.

Giuseppe paused about midway between the door and the table, keeping just outside the shaft of light, and Drako stole stealthily up to his side. He whispered a word in his ear and pointed first at the remains of the food and then toward the bed.

Giuseppe nodded and drew his knife and stepped noiselessly round the table to approach the bed. Drako remained still a moment and then, as if his courage was failing, retreated a couple of paces toward the door, keeping his eyes fixed intently upon his companion.

He could not have made matters easier for me, and I saw in a flash how to use the opportunity to advantage.

Holding my revolver ready, I crept up behind him and fired a shot close to his ear, at the same time striking him with my left fist on the side of the head, so that he should think the bullet had hit him.

He let out a loud yell of terror and rushed out of the room. I locked the door and then turned on Giuseppe, who was standing full in the moonlight, a grim picture of disconcerted fury.

"Not quite so simple as you thought, Giuseppe," I said, with a sneer.

He lowered his right hand as if to hide his drawn knife and took one step toward me.

"Stop right there and put that ugly knife of yours on the table in the light where I can see it. Quick," I added, for he hesitated, as if calculating the chances of a tussle. "I give you two seconds to obey."

With an oath he tossed it on to the table.

"Now put your hands up and don't you dare to move so much as a finger till I tell you." He obeyed and I picked up the knife and put it out of his reach. "Turn your back to me. I won't shoot you, unless you disobey me."

He turned round and I ran my hands over him to make sure that he had no other weapon; and when I had satisfied myself, I placed a chair so that his face would be full in the light and ordered him to sit down.

"Now we'll talk, and if you wish to save your life you'll answer the questions I ask; and answer them without lies. You and Drako came here to kill me, and as I knew you were coming I was on my guard. I had been told all about it. If I had shot you both the moment you entered, I should only have done what I had the right to do in self-defence. You know that. If I spare your life it will only

be because you are more use to me alive than dead; and that will depend upon how you answer my questions."

I paused to give him time to collect his scared wits sufficiently to realise that his life hung upon a very thin thread.

"Who betrayed us?" he asked sullenly.

"Don't question me," I replied sharply. "I have more friends on the island than you think."

"But no one knew except——" He broke off and finished with a savage oath. "Was it Molta? She has seen you. I know that."

For a moment it suggested itself to me to play the one against the other; but I could not betray her. She had given me the warning in all good faith, regretting her part in the affair, and with a genuine desire at the moment of being reconciled to me and saving me. "I told you not to question me," I answered sternly. "She came to me on quite a different errand. You and Drako were overheard."

"I'll have her life for it," he muttered.

"You've got to save your own first, Giuseppe. Now, whose plan was it to put Vicino's death on me, and why was it done?"

His eyes shifted uneasily. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'll make it plain enough. When I came back first I didn't care about the thing. I knew I hadn't done it, of course, but let the rest think it was my work while I found out whether it was you or Drako who had planned it all and what your motive was. You remember, I shammed not to know anything about it. But the time has come when the truth must be told. Was it you or Drako?"

"You did it yourself, Beppo."

"You saw me thrust the knife into Vicino's heart?"

"Yes, I saw you," he replied doggedly, gathering steadiness as he thought I knew nothing about it.

"You mean you were a witness and can testify to that?"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "You said you wanted the truth."

"And Drako saw it also?"

"Yes."

"And you have both told that to the carabinieri?"

"No," he replied, still readily but with a start of surprise.

"But you could testify if they got hold of you?"

"I could, of course; but I shouldn't. You don't think that?"

"You don't see what I am thinking, Giuseppe. The thing is this. I am accused of Vicino's murder, and the hue and cry has been raised for me and a price put on my head. There are only two witnesses who could swear to what you say is the truth. Drako is one; you, the other. The one thing you desire above everything on earth is my death, or conviction with imprisonment for life. One of the two witnesses is here alone with me in my power. Dead men tell no tales, Giuseppe. What would you do to me if the positions were reversed?"

He had listened to me at first with assumed indifference; but this disappeared as he began to realise the significance of my words. His features set, his lips tightened, and into his eyes crept the strained look of rapidly mounting fear; and when I paused he stared helplessly at me, a prey to abject terror.

"Come. You don't answer quite so glibly," I sneered.

"I should never—never—say—anything," he stammered slowly.

"An end to your lies," I cried sternly. "You would



do what I shall do now—make sure of your silence,” and as I spoke I raised the revolver slightly.

The sweat of fear stood thick on his forehead now and he was as grey as death as he met my threatening look. He knew full well what he would have done in my place, and judging me by his own standard, he read his doom in my eyes.

For a space of many seconds he was incapable of speech; but then he made a great effort and forced himself to reply. “I—I have lied, Beppo. You did not kill Vicino. It—it was all—all Drako’s doing.”

“Out with it then, quick. Everything about it,” I said.

“Give me time. You shall know it all,” he muttered with a deep sigh, as he wiped the sweat from his face and moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

“Drako put it into my head,” he said after a pause. “You had taken Molta from me and all that that meant; and I was hot against you for it. He hated you too; and when Vicino struck you and Drako had killed him, he said that we could put the thing on you, and by bringing the carabinieri to the place at once, you would be taken to have done it and we should go free. And I—I yielded to him. We thought you were dead, Beppo, or else I should never have consented. I should not. I swear that on my soul.”

“But when you found I wasn’t dead you still put it upon me. Why?”

“We feared Beltano’s anger on account of Vicino’s death. We knew that for Molta’s sake he would not touch you; but he would have given us up to the carabinieri. Drako urged it; and I consented. But I have regretted it always.”

The story was a cunning mixture of truth and lies, but

it was enough for me and I saw how to use it. I lighted the lamp and put pen and paper before him. "Write it," I said sharply.

He showed fresh alarm at this. "What use will you make of it?" he mumbled.

"Write," I thundered with an oath; and with that he fell to the task with labouring, unsteady fingers.

While he wrote I decided what to do with him. The cords with which I had tied up Breva were lying in a corner of the room, and I resolved to keep him a prisoner until I had had an opportunity of dealing with Drako, and then to carry them to the mainland and hand them over to the authorities.

As soon as he had finished the brief statement—and an ill-written, badly spelt farrago it was—I read it over and ordered him to sign it clearly. Then I made him stand up with his hands behind him and, slipping a noose on his wrists, tied him up securely, and took him to the storey above to the small room behind the lookout.

I bound his legs together and, crooking them, lashed the cords round his body and thrust him into a corner, and trussed up in this fashion I left him to his own gloomy meditations, while I searched the building for his companion. Drako had fled, however, and I returned to my room to think over the best use to make of the news I had obtained.

Giuseppe's statement by itself was not much value, of course; but I intended to use it to draw one from Drako. I knew the Greek well enough to be sure that when he found Giuseppe had accused him, he would accuse Giuseppe; and if they were handed over separately to the carabinieri, the latter would find means to frighten the truth out of them.

As soon as the dawn began to shew, I set to work to make it impossible for me to be again surprised by means of the cliff path. It was not difficult, but it occupied two or three hours, by the end of which time I had destroyed the path which had been recently made, and left a gap which not one man in ten thousand would dare to attempt even in broad daylight.

That work completed to my satisfaction, I had some breakfast and took some food up to Giuseppe; and while I fed him I examined the cords very carefully to make sure that they were secure.

I was now in less danger than at any moment since my return to the island. With Giuseppe laid by the heels and Ahmet disabled with his broken arm, there was no man likely to give me any trouble, even supposing that Molta was still in the vengeful mood of the preceding night. I set off to find Drako, therefore, with the confident assurance that an hour or two at most would see me on my way to the mainland.

The luck had gone all in my favour, and if it would but last a little while I should be well away before Beltano's return and all my troubles would be at an end.

But Drako had not been seen. I set Brevia to inquire about him, telling him to be careful not to drop a hint that it was I who sought him. He was not in his hut; Agapa had not seen him, the men knew nothing about him, and as the time passed and he was not found, I began to grow uneasy.

The afternoon came and found me still without tidings of him, so I decided to abandon the search and run the risk of taking Giuseppe to the mainland alone. Beltano might return at any moment, when my chance would be gone.

Then for the first time I realised the difficulties of what I had to do; and that I could not overcome them alone.

The instant I attempted to carry Giuseppe down to the boat, I should have every man on the island round me, and every one of those friendly to him ready to take a hostile hand in the game.

The thing was a sheer impossibility in the daylight; while even at night I must have someone ready at the boat so that I could get away before any alarm could be raised. By many of them I was already regarded as a traitor; and if they saw me taking Giuseppe away as a prisoner they would accept that as confirmation of my treachery and be ready to stop me even at the risk of their lives.

I sought Breva's help, therefore; but although he was devoted to me and hated Giuseppe as a saint hates the devil, I had to be very guarded. He was willing enough to help me to escape, and was for an instant start; but when I hinted that that was not all I had to do, he began to question me curiously, and the reserve with which I replied made him suspicious of my purpose.

I saw there was nothing for it but to tell him frankly what my plan was; but when he heard it, he shook his head.

"I can't do it, Beppo. I'll risk my life to help you escape, but I can't give up one of the band, even Giuseppe, to the carabinieri. It would be treachery for me. You may be right, and no doubt were I in your place I should do as you mean to do. I'll keep your secret; but I can't help you."

I endeavoured to persuade him and urged him to come with me; and we were still discussing the thing when Pepita came running to us excitedly.

"Beltano is coming, Beppo," she cried. "His boat is in sight."

"You should have gone. Go at once. There is still time," urged Brevé.

We ran to a spot commanding a view of the sea, and as I saw the boat, Molta came out of the house, and seeing me so near the boats, called the men to the landing stage, as if she had guessed I might make some attempt to get away and was resolved to prevent it.

I gritted my teeth in impotent regret for the delay which had thus destroyed my chance of escape.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### AN OVERWHELMING SURPRISE

FORTUNE could not possibly have served me a more scurvy trick than to bring Beltano back to the island at that moment; and as I gazed at the oncoming boat I could have cursed myself for having wasted the hours in the vain search for Drako.

It was hopeless to think of getting away now. A boat lay at the landing stage, but neither oars nor sailing gear were in it; and if Molta and the men with her had been as eager to speed my departure as they were dead set upon preventing it, I could not have escaped. Before I could have started, Beltano would have been near enough to have cut off all chance of escape.

From the high water mark of almost exuberant confidence, my spirits ebbed until I was very close to despair. Barely an hour before, I had been virtually master of the position on the island; I had gained the vital information for which I had risked the return; Giuseppe was in my hands, Ahmet disabled, and Drako hiding in fear for his life; and no one else, even at Molta's bidding, would have dared to cross swords with me.

But with Beltano once more in command, everything would be changed. His influence was paramount; and even the men who were friendly would follow and obey him instead of helping me. As Breva had declared, they were more afraid of him than of me, and this fear would determine their action. I could not count upon the help of

a single man on the island save Breva, and in the crisis which was at hand the lad, devoted as he was, would be powerless.

Plagued by these bitter reflections, I was thinking what to do when Molta called Breva away and then came up to me. She knew what her brother's return meant to me and the desperate mess I should be in the instant his foot touched the shore, and guessed I should be ready to grasp at any chance.

"What am I to tell Carlo when he lands, Beppo?"

"What should you tell him?"

"That rests with you. I am still willing to be friends."

"I had proof of that last night," I replied with a dry smile. "Do you wish me to give him that stiletto?"

"You drove me mad. I did not know what I was doing."

"There was method in your madness, Molta, for you left Giuseppe and Drako to try and succeed where you had failed."

"No, not that. I swear. I sought high and low for them to stop the attempt, but could not find them. They must have been already in hiding and have crossed by the cliff path when you and I were together. I tried even to follow by that way, and nearly lost my life in the attempt. I have been on the rack ever since. Do you mean they made the attempt after all?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

I looked steadily and meaningly at her. "I told you I was armed. Have you seen them since?" I asked.

"Mother of Heaven, do you mean they—they are dead?"

"I was in no play-acting mood last night," I replied, with a shrug.

"This will add to Carlo's fury against you. Even I

may not now be able to prevail with him," she cried, wringing her hands.

"You may spare yourself the risk of failure."

Her lips quivered as she bit them nervously. "You don't mean that——"

"I mean that what I told you last night was the truth. You attempted my life then, and you can tell Beltano what you will. There can never be anything between you and me, and even if I had cared for you, your act last night would have ended everything between us," and I turned away and left her.

I went back to the old fort and locked and barred the door securely. I wished to have time to think about the meeting with Beltano, and felt that the first interview between us had better take place while I was in a place of safety. I entertained no hope that I could appease his anger; but I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by preventing him from venting it on the impulse of the moment.

Moreover, at the worst I could hold the place against him for several days. I had sufficient food to last me a week or more at need, and as the narrow slits of windows had been constructed so as to defend the approach to the door, and I had a fair supply of ammunition, I could make matters very unpleasant for anyone who tried to get in.

Delay was all in my favour. I knew that matters on the mainland were in a very critical condition, and that Beltano's friend and patron, the mysterious Count, was likely to send for him at any moment. If I could hold out until he had to leave again the pendulum would once more swing over in my favour.

I spent what time I had in strengthening the defences as much as possible, and in making such other preparations



as were practicable. I felt fully justified in going to any extremes against Beltano. From Molta downwards everyone on the island believed he would take my life. He had indeed already ordered the others to kill me, and if it was to be a question of his life or mine and the chance offered to take his, I need not hesitate as to the answer.

So long a time passed without anyone coming near me that I was surprised. Half an hour at the most from the time I had left the shore would have sufficed for the boat to arrive, and yet for over an hour I was busied with my work and was left undisturbed. At a loss to account for this, I went up to the lookout to see what was going on.

As I passed Giuseppe he begged me to release him, swearing by all the saints in the calendar that he would not attempt to escape.

Thinking this might be a ruse, I examined the cords carefully. I had done the work well. I could see by marks on his wrists that he had been straining desperately to free himself; but not a single strand was loosened.

"You are torturing me, Beppo," he declared.

"And why not?"

He groaned. "I can't endure it. It is killing me. Are you a devil to find delight in making me suffer in this way?"

"I'm not fool enough to give you a chance of getting free, Giuseppe. It won't kill you; and if you stop struggling to free yourself, you'll be able to bear it better. Why should I care whether you suffer or not?"

"I told you everything last night and you said you would spare my life."

"There's no capital punishment in Italy; so they won't kill you. What I am going to do with you is to take you

over to the mainland and hand you to the carabinieri as Vicino's murderer."

"But I didn't do it. It was Drako."

"I've been trying to find him so that I could hear his version of the matter, but he has disappeared: and until I find him you must stop here."

He cursed Drako fluently, protesting his own innocence and blaming the other man for having dragged him into the mess.

"I don't believe you, Giuseppe. It was you who wanted me out of your way, and it was you who planned everything; and when Drako sees your confession I shall get at the real truth. Until then, you stay here just as you are."

At that he cursed me instead of Drako, calling down on my head all the torments of hell; and I left him swearing volubly as I stepped out to look for some signs of Beltano.

From the height on which the lookout stood I could command a view over the greater part of the island, and in no part of it could I detect a sign of the excitement I had expected to see as the result of his return. The open space between the men's hut and round the farmstead was practically deserted, and I saw some of the men away in the fields engaged in their customary work.

What puzzled me even more than this was the fact that about a mile from the island a sail of a boat showed white against the blue water as it rose and dipped foamily in a tussle with the stiff, squally breeze blowing straight in my face as I looked seawards. The boat was tacking against the head wind and going from, not coming toward, the island.

I could not understand it.

Where was Beltano? Evidently he had no thought of

attacking me, not even of looking for me as yet. Was Molta at the last moment trying to soften his anger against me? She was a strange, wayward, impulsive creature, quite capable of some such sudden change of feeling and intention when face to face with the crisis in which she believed that only her word stood between me and death.

It was probable enough that they were even now closeted together discussing my fate, and this might account for the absence of any sign of confusion and turmoil.

Whatever the meaning of the unexpected quietude might be, it was clearly my best course to remain where I was and wait for what was to come.

But what could be the meaning of that boat at sea? She was too distant for me to make out anyone on board, but I could see that she was being very badly handled. The breeze was freshening, and she was carrying far too much sail for safety even in the hands of a skilful helmsman, while the man who was sailing her knew so little of seacraft that he could not even keep her head steadily to the wind. At times she fell away so that when a squall struck her she would all but capsize, and at others he brought her up too close, with the result that she was taken aback and the big sail flapped idly and dangerously as she lost way.

More clumsy management could not have been displayed; and at length, after a more than usually heavy squall had all but laid her on her beam ends, the man appeared to realise his danger. He lowered the sail altogether and took to the heavy oars.

I could make out then that he was alone in the boat, and almost as unskilful with the oars as he had shewn himself with the sail. He was heading for the mainland, but his chances of reaching there in the teeth of such a wind as

was churning the tips of the waves into an angry foam were poor enough.

Who the fool could be, baffled me. The veriest clown on the island could have managed the boat better than he was doing, and that Beltano should have trusted himself in the charge of such a man was as inexplicable as that he should have sent him away the moment he had landed.

Presently my attention was taken from the boat by an incident at the farmstead. Pepita came out wringing her hands and hurried in the direction of the men's hut. Then Molta shewed at the door of the farmstead and, catching sight of Pepita, turned and called to someone within. The next moment Agapa rushed out and ran after Pepita and took her back, speaking in evident excitement and gesticulating freely. I could see that Molta rated the girl as they all went back into the house together.

But not a sign was there of Beltano. It was plain that my first surmise had been wrong. He and Molta were not discussing me. Where could he be? What could this strange inactivity betoken? As a rule he was a man of instant promptness in action, and that he should dally in this fashion was almost inconceivable. What was I to augur from it? I was entirely at a loss.

Pepita's action suggested that something was on foot in the farmstead, which she had stolen out to tell Brevia or some other of the men, and that the others had discovered her and prevented the attempt. Then it occurred to me that Beltano might have discovered Brevia's complicity in the matter of Masita's escape and that Pepita had rushed out to try and warn him or get help. This thought disquieted me intensely. It was for my sake the lad had run the risk, and to leave him to bear the brunt of it was cowardly.

I must go to his help. That was certain; and I was turning to go down for the purpose, when I caught sight of Brevi himself coming in the direction of the huts from the fields.

With a sigh of relief I saw that he was not in any immediate danger from Beltano. As he neared the farmstead, Molta appeared again at the door and ran toward him.

The next moment I uttered a cry of astonishment, my heart stopped for a second, and then all my pulses began to beat with the rapid rhythm of flails on a threshing floor.

Molta had scarcely left the house when Masita rushed out.

Agapa followed close on her heels and then Molta turned and together they seized Masita and began to drag her back to the house.

The next instant, my blood on fire, I was leaping down the rickety stairway to take a hand in the business.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### MOLTA'S TRIUMPH

As I raced in the direction of the farmstead I began to understand the reason why Beltano had been content to take no steps against me on his arrival. With Masita once more in his hands, he could well afford to leave me alone until he had carried through his purpose with her.

Molta had probably told him on his arrival that I had gone to the old fort; and his object now was to conceal the fact of Masita's presence from me until it would be too late for me to interfere. I had little doubt that he had brought a priest with him, and the strange quiet which had so perplexed me probably meant that he and Molta had been hurrying forward the preparations for a marriage. I knew how glad she would be to help on such a thing.

But against that theory there was the fact that Agapa was apparently lending her help as well. The very last thing she would do! And at this thought I was as completely mystified as ever.

One thing was quite clear, however. I would do my utmost to stop any marriage. There would be a fight for it of course. Beltano was the last man in the world to yield to anything but force, and he would stake his life to carry his purpose. I should have the advantage of surprise, however, and must therefore make the most of it.

With this idea I approached the farmstead from the back, and finding the door locked forced one of the windows with as little noise as possible and gained an entrance that way.

As I stood a moment in the passage listening for Beltano's deep voice, Pepita crossed from one room to another and caught sight of me. She started and put her finger to her lips, to enjoin silence, and then pointed to the floor above, indicating a room at the right of the house.

I ran up to the room, holding my revolver in readiness—for it was a case in which the first advantage might decide everything—and knocked at the door.

After a slight pause someone came and turned the key in the lock. I pushed the door wide open and rushed in expecting to come face to face with Beltano, and was ready to fire if the need came.

But there was no need, and I only laughed at my needless precaution. Beltano was not there. No one, except Molta and Masita.

With a half shamefaced air I pocketed my weapon and looked from one to the other of them in questioning surprise.

Masita sprang to her feet at my entrance and her look of alarm gave way to one of intense relief. I judged that she had been expecting Beltano, and that this was the cause of the change in her look. But I learnt the real reason afterwards.

For a few seconds neither of us spoke. "Where is Beltano?" I asked at length.

To my surprise the question disconcerted Molta. She hesitated and then stammered out: "On the other side of the island. I have sent for him."

"On the other side of the island?" I repeated. "How can that be when he has scarcely landed?"

At that Masita looked at her in surprise.

"I will go and fetch him," said Molta hastily.

"No, indeed you won't. I intend him to be as much

surprised to find me here as you were when I entered," and I put myself between her and the door.

"Do you mean that Beltano has been away?" asked Masita.

"Did he not return with you?"

"No. Julius brought me, and he has gone again."

"Julius!" I exclaimed in profound astonishment; and then the scales fell from my eyes. I understood the meaning of the boat I had seen and the reason for the clumsy handling of it. He was about as capable of sailing a boat in dirty weather as a puppy-dog.

Beltano had not returned after all, and it had been the boat with these two in it which had been mistaken for his. With him still absent I had nothing to fear; so I drew away to let Molta leave if she wished.

"Beltano is not on the island, signorina," I said.

"But Molta has told me that he is and will come to me here."

"So he will," was the reply, sharply spoken.

"But how can he when he is not on the island as——" Masita hesitated now to refer to me, and finished the sentence impersonally—"as is stated?"

"He will come, as I say," declared Molta doggedly.

"But not to find the signorina here, if I can help it, that is," I said firmly. "Tell me, signorina, why have you ventured here?"

She paused before replying. "I had to come."

"I am at sea as to all this still. But for Beltano's absence, you would have been in the greatest danger. Why on earth then should you run such a risk when there was not the least need?"

"I had to come," she repeated, lowering her eyes.

"You have no right to force your way here in this way,



Beppo," broke in Molta angrily, "and if you don't go at once I shall call the men to protect me."

"You are in no danger from me, Molta. Why do you say that?"

"Because I will not have you here. Because I do not feel safe in the presence of an assassin. Because—ah, why should I stoop to give you my reasons? It is enough that I order you to go."

"What is that anger intended to cover? And why that term assassin, after what you told me only last night? But I will go, of course; and if the signorina will consult her safety, she will not remain either."

"She cannot go. She shall not," cried Molta furiously.

"Your anger blinds you to the facts, Molta. But you know as well as I that now there is not one among the men who will dare to say 'shall not' to me in Beltano's absence."

"We shall see," she replied and set her back to the door.

I smiled. "You are now preventing me from going, Molta. But as you will," and I sat down deliberately. "I am concerned only for the signorina's safety; and she will not only leave this room when I please, but will also return to the mainland."

Molta stood by the door, her anger-flushed face frowning fiercely as she stared at me; but she was obviously at a loss what to do. She could not keep us prisoners indefinitely; and a few minutes more or less were of little importance to either Masita or me. I knew too that when her anger cooled she would see the absurdity of the position she had created.

Why Masita should have been mad enough to come to the island alone in this way, beat me; and her reply—that she had to come—threw no light on the matter. But she must

not remain. That was certain; and as her brother had been such a coward as to run off the minute she landed, there was nothing for it but for me to take her back to the mainland.

The wind was rising very fast, and the gusts which swept round the house shewed that it would be a dirty crossing and one in which I would not trust any other to manage a boat in which Masita was a passenger. This and other considerations which will be easily understood made me rather glad that her brother had taken the course he had. I had grave doubts, indeed, whether he would reach the mainland at all.

In the midst of these thoughts Molta gave me a surprise by opening the door suddenly and rushing out without a word.

I rose at once. "It is time to go, signorina."

"Is it really so that Beltano is not on the island?"

"Of course it is. Do you think he would not be in this room if he were?"

"I can't understand it all."

"The one thing really inexplicable is that you should have come."

She looked steadily at me and then smiled. "I had to come," she repeated.

"Well, you must not lose a moment in going again. While Beltano is away, there is no serious danger; but the instant he returns there will be."

"But how did you escape so as to be able to come just now?"

"Escape? I have not had to escape."

"But Julius brought me word that you were a prisoner in the old fort, and that Beltano had sentenced you to death; and when I came, Molta told me that that was true

and that her brother would come to me to—to—— Why do you look at me like that?"

She might well ask, for I was staring at her in blank amazement at the thought which her words had started.

"Do you mean—that you did this mad thing because of—of anything your brother told you about—about me?"

"Could I do otherwise? It was what you did in helping me that roused Beltano's wrath. Was I to let that cost you your life?"

I was overwhelmed by the thought of such a sacrifice.

"It was madness; sheer, downright madness," I murmured under my breath. "But thank Heaven it is not too late to put it right."

"It was no madness," she answered almost resentfully. "I could take no other course. I came to offer him any ransom he chose to ask. That is all."

"I know not how to thank you. Words are of little use in such a case. But at least I can take you back."

To my still greater surprise she hesitated. "I wish to do what I came to do," she said firmly.

"Thank God, there is now no longer any need. I have found out the truth about Vicino's death; and have made a prisoner of one of the men who killed him. Giuseppe. The other was Drako."

"And Molta knows that?" she asked eagerly.

"She has known it for many days."

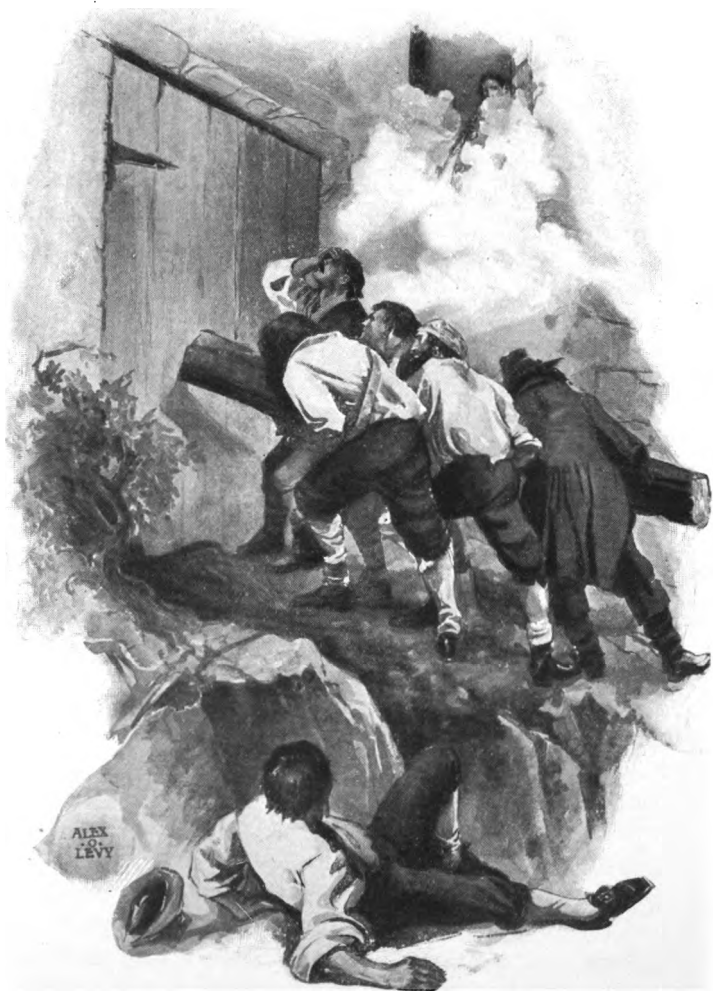
"And yet termed you an assassin. It was infamous."

I knew Molta's reason, of course—to blacken me in Masita's eyes.

"We have no time to spend in speaking of her. You will go back with me?"

"But you—afterwards?"

"I shall not return here."



The next moment half a dozen men came hurrying up the narrow path, carrying a heavy log of timber with which to batter down the door.—Page 273



"We will go," she agreed and rose at once.

We went down and as we left the house I was surprised to find to what strength the wind had attained. The sky was overcast and heavy masses of clouds were scudding rapidly before the squalls, which were driving fiercely over the white-flecked, angry waters.

Masita turned her eyes anxiously seawards.

"It will be a rough passage, but our boats are safe in far dirtier weather than this," I said, to reassure her.

"I was thinking of my brother," she replied, her face very troubled.

"He should be safe on the other side long before this." But I had serious misgivings, knowing how bad a seaman he was.

"Is not that a boat yonder in the far distance?" she asked, shielding her eyes as she strained them out across the water. "I can see a speck. There," and she pointed in a slightly northerly direction.

"I can see no sail."

"It is not set. Look!" and she clutched my arm and pointed again.

"It is a boat," I said, seeing it then.

"It must be Julius," she murmured, her colour fading. "He cannot manage a boat in such weather."

"We can pick him up as we cross," I assured her; and with that we hurried toward the landing stage.

Molta came up the path and met us. "Where are you thinking to go, Beppo?" she asked excitedly.

"The signorina is returning to the mainland."

"Not in such weather as this. There will be a storm; you cannot cross safely in such a sea as will soon be raging. You are mad."

"Not so mad as to let her remain here."

"You will lose your life if you go," she said, turning to Masita. "But you shall not go."

I had looked for opposition from her, and expected to find that she had called up some of the men to prevent my taking the boat out. I was surprised therefore to see her alone.

"You cannot stop me, Molta. If you try there will only be trouble."

"You will not go," she said doggedly. "Besides, there are neither sails nor oars on the beach. They are all in the house."

I knew that this was not true, for I had seen them in the little shed in which they were usually kept. I had made sure of this when planning to leave in the morning.

"Come, signorina," I said and hastened on.

"I will see you start, then," said Molta with a mocking smile, and she followed us down the path to the beach.

The next moment I understood the significance of that smile of hers.

The boat was no longer lying at the stage.

"Where is the boat, Molta?" I asked angrily.

"I want to see you start," she scoffed. "It is a long swim to the mainland even—for Masita's sake," and her lip curled in a sneer of malicious triumph.

I understood then. She had destroyed the boat to cut off all chance of our escape and keep us prisoners until Beltano's return.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### GREEK CUNNING

MOLTA had outwitted us cleverly. The loss of the boat meant checkmate to our plan of escape; for it was the only one on the island; and the mocking smile with which she stood gloating over my discomfiture at the success of her cunning shewed that she quite appreciated the disastrous effect to us.

But Masita's thoughts were less for herself than for her brother. "Do you know what has happened?" she said, turning to Molta. "My brother is out there in danger of his life."

"Did I bring him here or send him away again? What is it to me?"

"Send to his help and I will remain here, your prisoner, until Beltano returns. I pledge my oath to that," urged Masita.

"How can I send when there is no boat?"

"But you have taken it away. You know where it is. If you have a woman's heart in your bosom you will send and save him."

"The boat lies sunk at the mouth of the cove there; and of all the swimmers on the island only Breva could hope to face such a sea as that; and if he will risk for such a creature as Julius, let him. If your brother is drowned, blame Beppo. He declared that he would take you away, and to prevent him I destroyed the boat. What else could I do?"



It was like her to put the blame on me and so prejudice me in Masita's eyes.

"Can really nothing be done?" asked Masita piteously, turning to me. "Is there no other boat to be got?"

"Not one on the island," I replied, shaking my head.

"Could not something be done to raise this one?"

"You might dive for it, Beppo," sneered Molta. "The water there is not more than twenty or thirty feet deep."

I let the sneer pass. "I do not think there is such danger for Julius as you fear," I said to Masita.

"But the wind and that sea!" she cried.

"His boat would ride out a far heavier sea than this; and if he has the sense to return here, instead of making for the mainland, he will reach the shore safely."

"I will get Agapa to watch for him," put in Molta. "His love for her may guide him."

Her gibes had no effect upon Masita, whose thoughts were centred upon her brother's danger. "Do you think it possible that Breva could swim out? If he would save Julius I would make him rich for life," she said, drawing me aside.

Again I shook my head as I looked across the fast rising sea. "I doubt it; but we will find him. He is a very powerful swimmer and has before now swum to the mainland and back."

"What are you going to do?" asked Molta, as we were passing her. "You must return with me to the house."

Masita's reply was a glance of contempt which brought the blood in a flush of rage to Molta's white face.

I found Breva outside his hut talking to Pepita and explained what Masita wished, adding enough to shew him that I was as eager for the boat to be brought to the island as Masita was for her brother's safety. His prowess

as a swimmer had often been proved, and I knew that he had ample courage even for such a desperate venture as this. But he shook his head doubtfully.

"The tide will turn in less than an hour, Beppo, and then I should be powerless against it."

"But the boat means everything to Beppo, Brevà," said Pepita, urging him.

He looked questioningly at me and then drew me aside. "It is all but hopeless; but if I were to try it and succeed?"

"The signorina will give you any sum you choose to ask."

"It is not that," he replied quickly. "But if I brought the boat back what use would you make of it? Would you take Giuseppe to give him up?"

"Bring the boat and you yourself shall set Giuseppe free," I declared readily.

"Then I'll go," he said; "but don't count too much on the chance of my succeeding," and he went into his hut to make ready.

Five minutes later he had entered the water and we stood and watched him as he struck out with long powerful strokes until he passed the mouth of the cove, when he swam chiefly under the water, to avoid the hampering resistance of the waves.

We followed his course anxiously. Masita expressed profound surprise and admiration at the strength he displayed and the rate at which he swam and declared her belief that he would succeed.

"If any man in the world could do it, Brevà will," said Pepita, to whom this praise of her lover was like milk and honey. "But we must wait till the tide turns. Could we not watch him from the lookout, Beppo?" she suggested.

As we went there I told Masita about Giuseppe being a prisoner, and as we passed through the room where he lay, she shrank away from him with a shudder.

"There is hope," I exclaimed, as I saw that Julius' boat was nearer to the island than when we had last seen it. "Your brother is making for the island."

"It is farther than we thought, Beppo," said Pepita. "And I fear the tide has turned already. There is Breva," and she pointed to him.

"But if the tide stops Breva, it will help the boat," I replied, seeing Masita's look of consternation at her words.

We watched Breva for a time in silence. He was making desperate efforts and swimming gallantly; but after a few minutes I was disconcerted to find that he had made little or no progress. Presently he raised himself in the water attempting to get a view of the boat; but the waves prevented him; and again he resorted to the tactics of swimming under the surface.

But I saw now that when he came to the surface he had often lost instead of gained distance. Pepita saw this too and, glancing at me, lifted her hands in dismay. And at length Masita understood also.

The light was fading fast now, and it was only with difficulty that we could make out the boat. I knew then that the attempt, gallant and sturdy and well fought as it had been, could only end in failure.

Breva soon perceived that he was scarcely holding his own against the tide, and I saw him turn and commence to swim across the current, making for the northern part of the island.

He lost distance quickly then and I could tell by Petita's face that she shared the same fear which dismayed me—

lest he should have swum too far to be able to reach the little bay in which the landing stage stood. The colour ebbed slowly from her cheeks and she bit her lips strenuously and clenched her hands in the time of suspense.

But Brevia was too experienced a swimmer not to know the danger and quite skilful enough to avoid it. Half an hour passed while he was battling fiercely with the waves; and then I breathed freely once more as he turned and headed straight for the shore. I knew by that he was confident of landing safely.

"I will go and meet him," I said, and told Pepita to remain and help to prepare Masita's room for her. "Brevia has done all that a man could do," I said to Masita.

"I know that; but——" She left the sentence unfinished and with a deep-drawn sigh she gazed sadly across the angry sea in the direction in which we had last seen her brother's boat.

"We must hope that he will still reach the island," I said; but her gesture told me she had as little hope as I myself.

My anxiety was to the full as acute as hers; for if Julius failed, our position would be grave in the extreme. Her return to the island, brave and chivalrous as it was, had but made matters much worse than they had been even without the added anxiety of protecting her. And as I ran to meet Brevia, the thought of how to grapple with the crisis weighed heavily upon me.

There appeared to be nothing for it but to carry out the plan I had formed for myself before her arrival—to remain in the old fort and hold it as long as possible in the hope that Beltano would again be sent for to the mainland.

Until he returned there was little danger, of course;

for I had no reason to fear anything which Molta or the men would do. But his arrival would change everything, and the prospect alarmed me intensely on Masita's account as well as on my own.

Breva answered my warm praises and thanks with a smile of regret. "I am sorry I failed, Beppo. I was afraid of it from the first, but I found I was being carried back instead of forward, and if I had kept out longer I should have had more than I could do to make the mouth of the cove."

"We were watching you from the lookout and I began to fear for you. I was glad you turned when you did," I assured him.

"I have never known such a strong tide. It ran like a mill stream."

He was none the worse for his great effort; and despite the distance he had covered and the tremendous exertions he had made, he was scarcely distressed. I went to his hut with him and as he towelled himself vigorously I asked him what chance he thought there was that Julius would gain the shore.

"None," he said bluntly. "He is a fool with a boat in calm weather, and in such a wind as this helpless."

"Yet he is my only chance."

"Why?" he asked, looking up with a smile.

"The boat, of course."

"You shall have a boat, Beppo. The storm won't last many hours. It came too suddenly, and as soon as it passes and the sea goes down, I can reach the mainland and bring one off. If I could do it for a wager, I can surely do it for you. I owe you more than such a thing as that."

I gripped his hand heartily. "I shall never forget it,

Breva. You give me hope when Heaven knows I need it sorely. And when you bring the boat, you shall go with me."

"We will see. But have no fear that I will bring it."

He had indeed given me hope. If he could make his promise good before Beltano returned—and I did not doubt it for a moment when the storm subsided—the knot of all our difficulties would be cut.

On my way from him Agapa met me. "What is this between you and my brother, Beppo?" she asked. "Why do you seek his life?"

I described the attempt he and Giuseppe had made on the previous night, and the story which the latter had told regarding Vicino's death.

"Giuseppe lied, Beppo. It was his own planning from the first," and she gave me Drako's version, declaring that Giuseppe himself had admitted to her that he had killed Vicino and boasted of it; and she added that a third man, Petrarch, had been present and knew it also.

It was no time for me to make enemies, so I told her that Drako would have nothing more to fear from me, if he would clear me from the charge. She agreed so readily that I knew she had some further purpose in view. And out it came directly. "What are you going to do about Masita?" she asked. "Is it true, as Molta declares, that she came back to become Beltano's wife?"

"Had not Molta sunk the only boat there is, Masita would have been across on the mainland again. But now, the devil himself couldn't say what will happen."

"Will you have my help for her?"

"It's a new thing to find you zealous in her cause, Agapa."

"I am not. But I wish her gone from here."

"Wishes won't build boats; and when Beltano comes——"

She stopped me with a gesture of impatience. "If you have not turned coward there is a way, even when he does come. You could keep her safe in the old fort there and hold him at bay if you will do what I have thought of. It is to get both food and arms to the place and at the last moment make Molta a prisoner, even as she would have made Masita one to-day. With her in your power, Beltano will be helpless. I can help you in both things."

It was very Greek, but practicable; and I saw the advantages instantly. The reputation I enjoyed for recklessness would render Beltano sorely afraid for Molta, and as I had the ill name, there was no reason why I should not profit by it.

"Make good the first part of your plan and bring me the food and arms," I replied after a pause; and with her promise to do so, we parted; and I went back to the fort in much better spirits than I had left it.

If Breva could obtain a boat in time we should be saved by flight; and if not, there was still this cunning Greek girl's scheme.

I smiled grimly to myself as I thought of what Beltano's dilemma would be when he returned to find me prepared to stand a siege and with such a hostage as Molta in my power.

## CHAPTER XXX

### SUSPENSE

BREVA proved to be right about the weather; and when I returned to Masita I was able to assure her that there were already signs that the storm was abating. "The wind is not so strong as when we were watching your brother, and he should have no difficulty in reaching the shore," I told her, and urged her to rest so as to be in readiness to start the instant he arrived. "What we have to fear is that, when he finds the weather improving, he may make for the mainland instead of here."

"You really believe he will be safe?"

"He kept afloat when the wind was worse than it is, and every minute is making his position better. I must go and set up the lantern to guide him."

As I went out I told Pepita to do her utmost to reassure Masita and to lay stress on the probability that, when Julius found the weather improving, he would rather risk the crossing than return to the island.

"You think he will be drowned, Beppo?"

"I don't wish Masita to think so."

"He will be no great loss," she replied. "But I will do as you wish."

Except for Masita's sake and that his boat meant so much to us, I had no sort of regret about Julius. He was a dissolute, worthless fellow; he had shewn himself ready to sacrifice her to Beltano for his own selfish purposes; and it was only his miserable cowardice that had brought him into danger now.



But I set the lantern in its place and kept a watch for him. About midnight the rain came, and after that, the wind lessened considerably. When the dawn broke I went up once more to the lookout and scanned the sea eagerly for the boat. There was not a sign of it; and, as I could do no more, I lay down and slept for some hours.

In the morning the weather was still unpromising for Breva's attempt. The sun was shining, but the wind was still strong and the sea rough and troubled. He was confident, however, that by the afternoon the conditions would have changed sufficiently to admit of his starting; and there was nothing for it but to wait with such patience as I could.

Meanwhile, Agapa was as good as her word. During the morning she obtained ample supplies of food and a couple of guns—one of them a Winchester—with a quantity of ammunition, and brought them to me.

I was greatly relieved to find Masita easier in mind about her brother and quite disposed to believe that he had continued his journey across instead of returning to the island.

"He would not know, of course, that we were in such need of the boat," she said.

"And in a few hours, thank Heaven, that need will be passed," I replied, and told her of Breva's offer.

"He is a brave fellow, indeed," she cried enthusiastically.

"But if he should not succeed, what will you do?"

"So long as Beltano delays his return there will be no sort of trouble."

"But when he does return?"

"We shall be prisoners for a time here in this place. I am counting on Breva's success; but if he fails, we can still give Beltano a lot of trouble."

"Tell me."

"This place is very strong and there is only one way of approach—by that awkward path cut through the rocks. You will have to trust yourself here alone, or almost alone, with me and leave me to deal with him."

"You mean you will resist him by force?"

"You know him and can judge if there is any other way."

"But I will pay any ransom he asks. I came for no other purpose."

"When he finds us both in his power he will not listen to any such terms."

"You mean I should not have come, then? When Julius told me you had been condemned to death I felt I must come."

"Do you think he told you to induce you to come, say at the instigation of anyone else?"

"Oh, no. Why should he?"

"I was not in such danger as he said."

"He was distracted by Agapa's treatment and fear of her brother. My coming was my own act. I could not remain away. I did not know what to do."

"You did not understand the terrible risk you ran. Beltano is hot against me and would not have listened to you. There is a very short shrift here for anyone believed to be guilty of treachery; and that is how he regards me."

"You mean because of the help you rendered me. But I have remedied that by returning. It is not me he seeks, but my fortune. I know that by the influence it would give him, he hopes to make for himself a new position in the province."

"You would give him all you possess?" I cried in astonishment.

"All I have in this province, freely, if he demands it. Anything, if he will let us go free. Was I not hopelessly in his power when you helped me? Did not you risk your life at his hands and an even worse punishment at the hands of the authorities? Is it a time to count mere money? Was I to turn coward, when I knew that he had threatened your life for what you had done for me? At the worst I am but where I was when you rescued me."

"You had this worst in your thoughts when you came?" I asked, after a pause in which the fulness of her sacrifice was made clear. "You should not have come. It was rank madness."

"I know his love of money."

"You should not have come," I repeated earnestly.

"Say rather you yourself should not have returned," she said, as if to put me on my defence. "That was the step which has led to this. Could I with any sense of honour accept the sacrifice of your life when it was in my power to save it?"

"You knew my object—to clear myself from the stain of Vicino's murder. What was life worth to me branded as a murderer? You should not have come. I knew well enough the conditions I should find here and the danger I was running. I came for my own sake and purpose only, as I would come again for the same end—to prove my innocence, as, thank Heaven, I have proved it. But that does not touch you, and I repeat, you should not have come."

"Does not touch me?" she repeated quickly, catching at my phrase.

"I mean it was no cause for you to venture this risk."

"Say rather it would have been all the greater cause had I known it. You have your former life to go back to and I—I should be glad to think I helped you. But I

know now that you are right and that I should not have come. Not on account of the risk to me, but because in coming I have made matters so much worse for you. I have thought of that in the night. Had I not come, you would have got away. I see that now," she said with a deep sigh.

"That is the last thought I would have in your mind. We shall both get away, but you must leave the means to me. If Brega succeeds, we shall win that way; if not, the case is not so black as it may seem. When Beltano comes, we will try your plan first—the ransom. If that fails, we'll try mine."

Impulsively she thrust out her hand and smiled. "You would not take my hand when I last offered it, wishing to thank you."

"The obstacle is removed, thank God," I said as I pressed it. "I can take it as a man innocent of the deed we both feared I had committed."

"Yes, that is the right word—feared, not believed," she replied in a low tone and with an earnestness equal to mine. "And the rest of your story, you will now tell me that? Your name? I do not even know what to call you."

"It is Beppo's name that I have cleared; and while I am here, I am Beppo. I am only what you see me—a man of the people; and what story is behind my coming here, is as commonplace as that of any other no-account man."

"You would pique my curiosity?"

"No. I would only have you——" But at that moment Pepita came to say that Brega was asking for me, as he thought the sea was calm enough to start.

"It will get calmer every hour now and I want to have as slack a tide as possible," he said when I went to him.

"The sooner the better," I replied readily. "But you are sure you can get across? How long will it take you?"

"I have done it in three or four hours; but although the sea was calmer I had not anything like so strong a reason to hurry. Still, say four."

It was now two o'clock. By six he should be across and by seven or latest by eight, he should be back. He was absolutely confident of success.

As soon as he had started, I returned and told Masita, and together we went up to the lookout and watched his progress. The speed at which he slipped through the water astonished me even more than it had done on the previous evening. He swam with a long sweeping overhead stroke, as graceful as it was powerful, which carried him forward at a pace which to me, a clumsy swimmer at the best, appeared little short of marvellous.

"God grant that he will succeed," murmured Masita with a sigh.

"He himself has no shadow of doubt."

"He may be carrying our lives with him," she said, scarcely above her breath; and by that I knew that she realised more fully than I had thought the peril of our position.

"There is only one fear now—that Beltano may get here first. Breva will be back in five or at most six hours."

"They will be hours of suspense, Beppo."

"Hours of hope, rather."

"Yes, that is better. Hours of hope. I will try to be as confident as Breva himself; but can't you give me something to do? I don't want to think."

I found her something to do and set her to help in storing the provisions which Agapa had brought and in com-

pleting the preparations to be made in case Beltano should arrive first.

How that afternoon lagged! I stole up many a time to the lookout, scanning the sea with a nervous dread that I should catch sight of Beltano's sail. But the hours passed and no sail shewed; and each time my hopes grew stronger that after all we should get away before he returned.

I found that Masita had been counting the minutes as anxiously as I. At six o'clock she met me. "Breva should have reached the land, Beppo. How soon can we look for a glimpse of his boat?"

"We will go and see at once. He may have crossed in less time than he told me, and already be on his way back."

"I declare I am almost afraid to go," she said, with a nervous, wistful smile. "I would not have believed I could be such a coward."

As we were going up she paused and asked: "What are you going to do with Giuseppe if we get away?"

"Leave him where he is for the others to find him. I had meant to take him to the mainland, but Breva extorted a promise that I would not. He is a staunch lad. He hates Giuseppe and has suffered constant ill treatment from him; but he will not be a party to betraying a member of the band to the carabinieri."

"I like him the better for that," she declared. "But how will you prove that you had nothing to do with Vicino's death?"

"I can't attempt it until I myself am in safety."

"I had never thought of that. What will you do when we leave here?"

"There is a sail," I cried excitedly as we stepped on to the lookout.

She caught her breath. "Thank God and that brave

lad," she cried. "It must be as you said. He reached the land sooner than he thought. But what is the matter?" she broke off, seeing the serious look on my face.

"Nothing is the matter; but it is a larger boat than I looked for."

"Shall I remind you that you once said you never went out to meet trouble?"

"True," I said, forcing a laugh. But she saw that I was really uneasy.

"There may have been no other for him to get," urged Masita.

"We shall soon know at the rate she is travelling. Your eyes may be quicker than mine. Let me know the instant you can make out who is on board her."

I could not keep the strenuousness out of my voice; and noticing this, Masita said no more. We watched in silence for some minutes.

"The men below have seen her," I said presently, seeing some of them clustering on the cliff with their eyes bent seawards. Then Molta came out of the farmstead and joined them; and Agapa followed, looking round as if in search of me.

Knowing nothing of Breva's departure, they would naturally jump to the conclusion that it was Beltano returning; and Agapa was looking for me to carry out that very Greek scheme of hers.

Then Masita touched my arm gently. "There are more than one on board," she said in little more than a whisper.

She was right. Two or three minutes afterwards I made out the forms of two or three men.

"I must go down to the others. If it is Beltano, I have something yet to do."

"You believe it is?"

"I fear it. You must remain here," I added, as she was following me from the platform of the lookout. "I will return before he can land, if my fears are right."

"I would rather come with you."

"No, if you please. You cannot help me, and I must do this thing in my own way."

I carried a heavy heart as I went down and crossed to the others to learn whether my fears or my hopes were to be realised.



## CHAPTER XXXI

### A PARLEY

As I neared the small group who were watching the approach of the boat, Agapa hastened to meet me.

"Beltano is coming, Beppo," she said, highly wrought and excited.

"Are you sure it is Beltano?"

"Who else can it be? Luigi, who has the eyes of a chamois, has seen him in the boat. You will keep faith with me?"

"I must be certain that it is he."

My worst fears were to be realised, it seemed. I pushed on to Luigi. "Who is in the boat?" I asked him.

He turned as I laid my hand on his shoulder and made a gesture of concern. "Who but Beltano? It is ill news for you, Beppo."

"You are certain?"

"He is at the tiller. Wait till she rolls a bit and you will see for yourself. No one else could make so much of so slight a breeze."

The boat was sailing dead before the breeze, and the sail hid those on board. I waited by his side in silence until the boat rolled and I could make out several figures. But the distance was still too great for me to distinguish one from another.

"There, I saw him clearly then," exclaimed Luigi.

But I felt that I must wait until my own eyes convinced me.

To make a false step at this juncture would be a fatal

blunder, and I drew away to a slightly higher spot than where the rest were standing, and strained my eyes upon the boat.

Presently Agapa joined Molta and the two spoke eagerly together; Agapa, talking with earnest and almost impassioned gesticulation; Molta listening with a set, frowning face, and now and again flashing questioning glances towards me. It was an easy inference that they were speaking of me; and after a time they both began to move slowly in my direction.

Meanwhile the boat made steady progress; and I recognised Beltano in the stern.

At that moment Molta and Agapa came up to me. "I have told Molta what you said, Beppo," said Agapa with a meaning glance.

I had not said anything to her, of course; but I saw that she had some plan; so I turned with a frown to Molta. "And your reply?"

"I cannot answer for Masita; but for you, yes."

Agapa moved away and began to walk towards the old fort and, as if wishing to be out of earshot of the others, I followed her slowly.

"Tell me more plainly what you mean by that," I said to Molta.

"You know Carlo's hot wrath against you and his intentions in regard to Masita. Agapa declares that you mean to shut yourself with her in the fort and set him at defiance. That will not save you, Beppo. There is only one way in which you can be saved, and only one person who can do it. I, myself; and only if you will do what I asked you before."

"Masita's return has wiped out my offence against Beltano," I replied, halting a second, to prevent her suspecting my intentions. "And she is ready to give any ransom he may ask," I added, as I moved on again.

"Of what use is it to talk of ransom when she herself is back on the island? Can he not do with her as he will?"

"No, she will kill herself rather than yield to him. Besides, there is Agapa."

She laughed with a scornful toss of the head. "Is Carlo a man to be scared from his purpose by a woman's threats?"

"Has not Agapa shewn how dangerous she can be?" I retorted.

"We are but wasting time, Beppo," said Molta angrily, coming to a sudden halt. "You must decide now. It will be too late when Carlo lands."

We had traversed about half the distance to the fort; and at need I could carry her forcibly the rest of the way; but I did not wish the men behind us to see my plan. "How do you know that you can prevail with him?" I asked, as if undecided whether to yield. And then an idea occurred to me. "The moment he lands he will be like a madman and his first impulse will be to kill me. I cannot take that risk," and I started to leave her.

As I hoped, she followed me, unwilling to abandon the hope of gaining her end.

"Wait, Beppo. I will answer with my life for you," she said earnestly.

But I waved my hands and quickened my pace. "No, no. I know him too well."

She hurried after me and caught me by the arm, but not until I had gained a further hundred yards and the mouth of the path was close at hand. Agapa had now halted and stood between us and the men, most of whom had gone down to the landing stage to meet the boat.

I was now certain of success, but I kept on until I reached the path. "I will have the walls of this place between us when I first meet him," I declared.

"They will not save you, Beppo. There is only the one way."

At that I turned suddenly and looked sternly at her as I seized her wrist. "Are you seeking to trick me? Do you think it safe to play with me?" I glanced back as if in fear that Beltano was already at my heels and, retaining my hold of her wrist, I hurried up to the door.

"No. I swear on my soul I had no such thought, Beppo," she cried as I unlocked the door.

She appeared to guess my intention then, and with a vigorous effort strove to wrest her arm from my grasp. But I prevented her and, dragging her inside, locked and barricaded the door. "Now, you may as well know the truth, Molta. I have brought you here as a hostage, to bring Beltano to reason. You and he both know me. He seeks my life, and you yourself sought it before. Now I have turned at bay. So long as I am safe, no harm will come to you; but not one moment longer."

She fell away from my stern look, and her hand moved as if to draw a weapon; and, remembering her former attempt on my life, I seized her hand and disarmed her.

"Beppo!"

It was Masita's voice, and I turned to find her watching me, her eyes wide with amazement and indignant reproach.

"Do you make war upon women and threaten them with death?" she asked indignantly, when I did not speak. "Let Molta leave at once."

To have shewn a sign of weakness before Molta would have been the act of a fool, so I answered sternly, "I am fighting for my life, signorina, and choose my own methods. You need not interfere. Molta remains here."

"Then I shall go," she declared instantly and came to us.

"No," I said doggedly. "Beltano is on the island and

no one shall open that door. That I swear;" and I stood in front of it, barring her way.

She sought to pass me, but I held her back. She stared at me fixedly for a space. "I will be no party to this. You shall not keep me a prisoner."

"You are but wasting your breath, signorina. I know the man I am fighting and how best to fight him. Molta stays, and if my life is in danger at Beltano's hands, I will take hers. Call it warring upon women, or what you will, that is my last word; and both Beltano and Molta know whether I am the man to keep it. And now, please, return to your own rooms."

But her will was too strong to yield to me, and she made another attempt to get to the door. At my wits' end what to do, for the time was pressing and I looked for Beltano to come at any moment now, I took a desperate step. I stepped from the door and drew my revolver, levelling it at Molta.

"Open that door, signorina, if you will, but the instant you do it, Molta dies."

Her hands were already on the bars, but she withdrew them and looked round at me, trembling and pale. I kept my eyes fixed upon Molta, and not a feature relaxed to shew either of them that I was not dead set upon carrying out my threat.

In the moment we stood thus, we heard the sounds of men approaching; and then Masita, convinced that I was in fierce earnest, pressed her hands to her face and with a cry of horror turned and rushed up the stairway.

Someone knocked loudly at the door, and I took Molta up to the floor above and locked her in the room I had prepared for her. Then I went to one of the narrow slit windows.

"Who is there?" I called.

"Beltano," came the reply. "Open the door, Beppo, at once."

"What do you want with me?"

"Open the door, I say, or I shall break it in."

"Break it in, Beltano. But I warn you I am armed."

The answer was pretty much what I had expected. Someone fired and a bullet came whistling through the window and buried itself in the wall opposite. I had taken good care to place myself where I should not be in danger.

I had my guns close at hand; but I did not reply to the shot, although I could have done so with fatal effect. The windows had been very cunningly contrived, so that they commanded the whole space in front of the door, and there was not a square inch of cover in which a man could shield himself from a shot fired from where I stood. But I could afford to wait and desired to parley before resorting to force.

Some half minute of silence followed the shot before Beltano spoke again. "Are you going to open the door, Beppo?"

"So that you can fire at me next time without this shelter? I can listen to anything you have to say."

"I shall have it broken in then."

"You can't do that. You know that. And if you try, I shall do what you did just now—use my guns." Then as a ruse to lead him to believe that I was not alone, I said: "If they attempt to break down the door, fire."

Beltano started at this and spoke eagerly to Luigi, who was at his side, and then called: "Who is with you?"

I laughed and left him to think what he would. He understood the difficulty which he had to face; and that if

he tried to carry out his threat, it was not only likely to fail, but that both he and the others would be in danger.

"I mean you no harm, Beppo. What are you afraid of?"

"That's better," I said. "Send the rest out of earshot and we can talk. If I had wished I could have shot you long before this, but I prefer to talk things out first. I am ready to come to terms."

There was a pause in which I heard him swear savagely; but he saw the prudence of parleying first, and sent the men back.

In the few moments of interval I saw a way of complying with the spirit of Masita's wishes in regard to Molta, although I had had to disregard them in the letter. Her taunt—that I was warring upon a woman—rankled. I had no sort of wish to appear a coward in her eyes, and if I could prevail with Beltano without using the fact of Molta's presence, I would do so.

"Now, Beppo, make an end of this folly," he said.

"Take your hand from your gun," was my unexpected reply. I could see him without his seeing me; and he looked up quickly in the direction of my voice in uneasy surprise. But he deemed it discreet to do what I said.

"Why have you shut yourself up there?" he asked.

"We needn't pretend, Beltano. Before you went off this last time you left orders that I was to be put to death. Everyone on the island made it plain that you were hot against me because I carried Masita to the mainland; and Molta has warned me, not once, but many times, that your first act on landing would be to see that that order was carried out."

"You lied and deceived me and must take the consequences," he said angrily.

"Then you'll understand why I have come here. I have food to last many days and enough ammunition to give me a dozen shots at every one of the men. You can't starve me out, and you know the strength of this place well enough to judge whether you can carry it against me. I have no anger against you, and certainly none against the rest; but I shall make a stiff fight for it if you drive me to that. But I would rather come to terms than fight."

"What do you mean by terms?" he demanded angrily.

"If Molta had not destroyed the only boat on the island I should have gone away and you would never have seen me again. I am still willing to go."

"No doubt; but I'm not willing," he growled with an oath, and then asked: "Will you give up Masita?"

"There's something more. Masita is willing to pay you any reasonable sum you ask. She returned here of her own free will to offer it, and it was to prevent her leaving again that Molta destroyed the boat."

"Good. She did right," he interposed sharply.

"Does that mean that you won't come to terms?"

"I'd burn first," he cried furiously. "Am I a fool to dream of such a thing when I have you both here in my power. What you heard is right. You shall pay for your treachery with your life. I'll give you ten minutes to open that door; and if you disobey me, I'll break it down."

"Then you'd better get out of range."

Quick as light he whipped out his revolver and fired point-blank at me as I stood speaking to him in full view.

I had time to draw back and fired at him as he hurried down the zigzag path. I wasted the bullet, however; for I missed him as he shot round the corner of a rock.

And in this way hostilities began.



## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE ATTACK

I WAITED with anxious curiosity to see what steps Beltano would take next. I could not say whether he knew how the formation of the windows would assist me, or whether he had taken my words as mere bluff. If he did know, the problem before him was a very stiff one.

The windows were cut in thick stone which slanted away from the opening at an angle so as to allow of the muzzle of a gun being thrust through, while the man behind it was scarcely exposed to any risk at all. They reached very low down, moreover, almost to the floor; so that anyone even close to the door was easily within range.

I was indeed absolutely confident of being able to defeat an attack upon the building from that side; and the only cause of fear was lest Beltano should think of the cliff path and have that made easy in order to get at me from the rear. If I had only had one other man with me, I could have laughed at all his efforts.

Busied with these thoughts, I was keeping a vigilant eye for the first sign of the forthcoming attack when Pepita came to me. They had heard the shots and Masita had sent her to learn what had occurred.

"I could not leave here or I would have come to tell her," I replied. "Ask her to come to me; and stay, Pepita, have you courage enough to help me?"

"How can I help, Beppo? You would not have me fire on the men?"

"Oh, no. But I wish to know if any attempt is made to improve the path round by the cliff. Will you go every hour to the lookout and warn me the instant you see a sign of anything being done? You need not show yourself if you lie at full length and peer over the lower rail."

She promised readily and went to give my message to Masita. The scene with Molta had made a very strong and exceedingly unfavourable impression upon Masita, and when after some delay she came to me, the change in her was unmistakable. Her face was set and hard, her manner cold, and her eyes full of suspicion and fresh alarm.

"Why have you sent for me? I have come because you have made me afraid of you. You rule women by fear."

Her words and her attitude irritated me as much as her previous misreading of my treatment of Molta. At another time, I should have smiled at it, no doubt; but my nerves were at high tension and I was not master of my temper.

"I did not send for you in any such sense as you suggest," I replied testily. "And you misread the whole thing just now."

"You raised your pistol against a defenceless woman and the look in your eyes was not one to be misread."

"So much the better; but it was only playacting, nevertheless. I had not just cleared myself of one murder merely to commit another. Had you opened the door I should not have hurt Molta; but I had to stop you, and I dared not let her see that I had any other intention."

I must have acted the desperado well, for she found this explanation hard to credit. "I have looked to you for the truth," she said after a pause.

"Well, you couldn't have it then; but you know it now. My old reputation is a very ugly one; and I had to trade

on it. I hope Beltano will be as ready to believe I shall act up to it as you seem to be. But I am no cutthroat; even if I do war upon women."

She bit her lip and winced and after another pause asked with less coldness, "What do you wish me to do?"

"To understand things as they really are." I replied shortly. "I must know if you still persist in leaving here. I can't stop you now, of course and—ah, things are too serious to waste breath in this way," I broke off impatiently. "Let me tell you what has occurred. Beltano has refused to accept any ransom. He swears he will break in here, and has gone away to make his preparations. I have not said a word about Molta being here, and shall not, until there is no other course left. He will be back in a few minutes, and there will be no more talk until one or other of us has the best of the first round. He is dead set upon killing me, and has already fired at me twice; and I am going to use these guns to defend myself. That is the position, signorina."

"Of course I shall not go. I am sorry I—I misunderstood," she added hesitatingly.

"I am not sorry, for if you did, Molta certainly would," I replied with a smile. "But I think you had better go back to your room. This will be no kid-glove affair."

"No, my place is surely here, if I can help you. It is for me you are running this risk, although you speak only of yourself. Can I help?"

"If you will pull a trigger when I tell you—I don't mean to shoot at anyone," I added quickly as she winced. "But I have led him to think that he has to fight more than me, and it would be a point to keep up that belief."

"Of course I can do that; and I could load the guns for you. How many men has he with him?"

"Probably a dozen—more than he will have when this thing is through," I said grimly.

"I am glad you spoke to him. It is he who makes it all necessary. But do you think you can keep him at bay?"

"I'll show you and then you'll see what I wish you to do;" and I explained how the windows had been constructed for the purposes of defence; that it was exceedingly difficult for anyone outside to aim at those within; and that except for the possible accident of a chance shot hitting me I was in no sort of danger. "What I want you to do is to keep well back behind the shelter of the wall and point the muzzle of a gun through the window that it may appear as if another man was with me, and fire it once or twice."

I thrust the gun through the window and moved it about to illustrate my meaning. As I was doing it, someone fired at us from without and the bullet whistled through the opening and flattened itself against the opposite wall.

Masita did not flinch in the least. "I see now what you mean about there being no danger," she said calmly.

The shot proved the commencement of the trouble. A rapid fusillade followed, directed at the same window; and the next moment half a dozen men came hurrying up the narrow path, carrying a heavy log of timber with which to batter down the door.

Beltano's plan was plain. He meant the shots to prevent my having a chance to fire on the men while they broke their way in.

Telling Masita to keep well behind the wall, I ran to the other window and seized the Winchester repeater which I had carefully loaded.

The improvised battering ram was close to the door before

I opened fire; but it did not reach it. I did not shoot to kill. All I wished to do was to disable as many as possible and weaken Beltano's force. A wounded man would be as helpless against me as a dead one; so I aimed at the legs of the three men on my side of the log and fired in rapid succession.

Every shot told. The men fell, down went the log, and the remaining three stood a second in consternation and then bolted back along the path at top speed. I sent two shots after them, and a fourth man fell close to the first bend in the path. The other shot missed.

The first attempt was over and the honours distinctly with me. Four men out of his dozen or so would be a heavy loss to Beltano, who, by the way, had been careful to keep himself well out of sight; and the only success he had to set against such a loss was the placing of the log close to the fort, where it would be ready for use if he could induce the others to run the risk of a further attempt to break down the door.

The fusillade was kept up for a time against both of the windows; but that amounted to no more than a waste of ammunition, and after a while this ceased.

Masita and I had both kept carefully out of range; and except that a splinter of the stone had grazed my cheek, we were both absolutely untouched.

When the firing stopped, I looked out and saw that the wounded men were crawling away, dragging themselves painfully and slowly along. In each case my bullet had broken a leg. "Stop right there," I shouted, and enforced the order with a shot aimed just ahead of the foremost. "Let Beltano take away that log, or you stay where you are. I won't fire on anyone who fetches it."

The men lay as still as the log itself; and presently Luigi

shewed at the bend of the path. "You won't fire at me, Beppo?" he called.

"No. What is it?"

"To help these fellows. You don't want them to bleed to death?"

"They brought that log with them, Luigi, and it must go when they go. Tell Beltano that," I replied.

He went away and soon returned with four others to fetch the log. But I knew Beltano, and a flash of suspicion warned me that there might be some devilment behind this ready compliance with my demand. I called Masita to change positions with me and crossed to her window with my now reloaded weapon, telling her to let the muzzle of her gun be seen again as before.

It proved to be a valuable precaution. Luigi remained at the end of the path to help the wounded men get away, and four others came up and lifted the log. They carried it a few paces off and then halted, as if having some difficulty in handling it.

At that moment the firing broke out again, directed this time against the window where I had been before; and, as if they had been waiting for the signal, the four men gathered themselves for an effort and came dashing back to drive the log against the door.

I had had one of them covered, however, and let fly at him just as they started. He went down in a heap, falling across his end of the log. His weight tilted it up so that, although it struck the door, it did no harm. I fired again; but the bullet went wide this time; and the rest, seeing that the ruse had failed, turned tail and fled for their lives.

I hit one of them as he ran and broke his right arm; but the shot was nearly the end of matters for me. A bullet came through the window as I fired and hit my left arm. It

did no more harm than draw a little blood, and it was a cheap price to pay for the disablement of two more of my antagonists.

But Masita took fright when she saw the blood. "You are wounded," she cried.

"The merest scratch," I said; but she would not be convinced until I took off my coat and shewed her the small wound. And then nothing would satisfy her until she had fetched water and bathed it and bound it up.

She did it so gently, bathing it with the touch of shrinking tenderness and asking every second if she was hurting me, and shewed such solicitude that I was almost glad the bullet had not missed me.

All this time Beltano had shown no sign of renewing operations. The wounded men had gone and the log still lay by the door; but I did not much fear that any further attempt would be made to use it.

"What do you think Beltano will do?" asked Masita.

"I guess he's asking himself pretty much that question just now. He finds he has bitten off more than he can chew. Volunteers for the log work will be difficult to find."

"He may try it in the dark," she suggested.

"There will be scarcely any dark to-night. The moon is at the full. No, he won't try and knock at the front door again. What we have to worry with is that cliff path. I see what to do," I exclaimed, as an idea occurred to me. "Why on earth didn't I think of it before?"

"Tell me," she said anxiously.

"The side of the fort looks out on the only spot where he could make a path, and from an opening something like these windows in the room you use, I could make it as dangerous for anyone to attempt to make a path, as it is to monkey with that log down there. Will you stay here and

watch while I go to see what I can do there? If you see a hair of a man's head, call me instantly. Have Pepita with you if you'd rather not be alone."

"I will keep watch. She may be of use to you."

I climbed out on the narrow plateau to select the best spot for the opening which I proposed to make and, having settled this and found an iron crowbar among the stores on the lower floor, I set to work with a will.

I had none too much time. It was already growing dusk; and being fairly certain that Beltano would make the attempt I feared as soon as the light waned, I was desperately anxious to be ready for him.

It was hard work and I was a novice at the business; but after I had dislodged the first stone, I got on quicker, and had just broken through when Pepita came hurrying down from the lookout.

"There is another boat in sight, Beppo. It must be Brevia," she cried.

I dropped the crowbar and turned to run up to the lookout. But some shots were fired at the front of the building and Masita called.

"Beppo! Beppo!"

I sent Pepita back to watch the boat and ran to Masita.

"I saw two or three men at the turn in the path there, and I pushed the muzzle of the gun through the window, and then the firing followed," she said. She was perfectly calm and undismayed. "I expect they are going to try another attack on the door."

I made a cautious survey. No one was in sight; but I saw that some holes had been drilled through one of the thin intervening rocks and that the firing came from this masked battery.

Then Pepita called and presently came running to us.



"There are some men trying to pass by the cliff path, Beppo," she announced.

There was evidently going to be trouble, and Beltano was getting to work much more cautiously this time. He meant to attack me simultaneously at the front and the rear, calculating that I could not defend both positions at the same time. And he had timed things so that he could utilise the hour of dim light before the moon rose.

It promised to be a pretty lively hour.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### BELTANO'S RUSE

A VERY short reflection convinced me that the danger was not anything like so serious as it appeared. Beltano had probably heard that the cliff path had been recut; and as he was reckoning that he could use it without difficulty, I judged that he would select that way for the main attack.

Then I observed that, although the firing still continued in front of us, it slackened considerably. I could make out only three or four holes in the section of rock, and while the guns had been at first fired simultaneously, no more than two shots were now being fired together.

I drew a breath of relief. I knew what this meant. The force at Beltano's disposal had been so weakened, as the result of the attempts on the door, that he had not enough men for a double attack. I jumped to the conclusion, therefore, that he had propped a couple of his wounded behind the rock and set them to fire in order to distract my attention while he made the attempt at the other side of the building.

I would answer ruse with ruse. Pepita, like the rest of the women on the island, knew how to use firearms, so I told her and Masita to keep a gun shewing from each window and to fire an occasional shot. This would give the impression that I was waiting for the approach of the men that way, and in the meanwhile I ran up to the lookout to watch Beltano.

Taking care not to be seen, I peered out, and then laughed. The two men he had sent in advance had just

discovered that the work I had done on the path after Giuseppe and Drako had used it to get at me, had rendered it impassable. Unable to believe this, he recalled the men and climbed out to see for himself.

If I had thought to take up my gun with me, I could have finished the fight between us there and then, and I ran down at once to fetch it. But on my return the chance was gone. He had gone back and was standing giving some directions to those about him. The light was bad and the distance considerable, so I would not risk a shot, as a miss would have revealed my whereabouts to no purpose.

His plan was soon formed, and presently his men appeared with tools and began to work to cut stepping places in the rock.

This did not alarm me, however, as I could easily stop them from the hole in the wall below.

Meanwhile, the boat of which Pepita had told me had approached near enough to the island for me to make out that there were two men in her, and I concluded therefore that they were some of Beltano's men who had been instructed to follow him. It was bad news, of course, as they would strengthen his force.

I returned to the room below and renewed my crowbar work and soon completed such an opening as would serve my purpose.

My first shot stopped them. They dropped their tools and scrambled back in a fine scare; and as soon as they had gone I called Pepita and told her to watch through the hole, and then went to Masita.

The firing in front of us ceased almost directly, and it was an open inference that Beltano had accepted defeat for this latest attempt.

"It is getting very dark; do you think he will make any

other attempt?" asked Masita when I told her this, somewhat jubilantly.

"It is not too dark to see anyone against the white rock."

"The log is still by the door and he might attempt a rush for it."

"I wish he would and wish with all my heart that he himself would lead."

"Beppo!" she cried, reading my thought.

"Do you think I shall hesitate to shoot him? Not for a second."

"There is someone in the path," she said anxiously.

"Beppo! Beppo!" called a voice. It was Luigi. "Will you speak to Beltano if he comes here?" he asked.

"No," I replied, suspecting some such trick as he had played before.

"Yes, yes," said Masita anxiously. "Hear what he has to say," she urged.

"Wait, Luigi," I called. "He used you before to try and fool me and I won't trust either of you again. Wait till the moon's up, and if he comes unarmed, I'll listen to him. If he doesn't like that, he can send his message by you. But you mustn't shew yourself again till there's more light. I shall fire if you do."

"He may mean to offer terms," said Masita hopefully.

"More likely he wants to keep me talking here while the men push on with the work on the cliff path," and I went in to ask Pepita if she had seen anything.

Nothing had been done; so I told her to prepare some food for us all, but to keep a lookout at the same time; and wishing to relieve something of the strain of Masita's thoughts, I asked her to go and help.

"I am too anxious," she replied. "I would rather remain here."

I shook my head. "You are chief officer, but I am in command; and an officer's first duty is to obey," I said with a smile.

"How you can smile at such a time baffles me."

"We are winning. Why should we not smile?"

"But it can only end in one way. If we resist the attacks we are still prisoners, without the hope of escape."

"When I have lost hope I shall cease to smile, but not till then. And I am a very long way from despair as yet. You must please do what I ask. There will be no more trouble to-night, and as I shall need either you or Pepita to watch later on, you must have both food and rest as soon as possible."

"If you say that, I will go," she said at once.

Was I so far from despair as I had said? Or was the confidence I felt at that moment only the natural elation at my first success? What was likely to be the outcome of it all? I could hold Beltano at bay for some days, but what would follow at the end? When planning the present scheme in the first instance I had reckoned upon Beltano having to leave the island. But was he likely to obey any summons, however urgent, when compliance meant the abandonment of his revenge upon me and the loss of Masita?

And if he decided to remain, what should we be but prisoners, as Masita had said, without the hope of escape? I held Molta as a hostage; but even if I were the reckless desperado Beltano believed and were to put her to death, how would that serve us?

There could be but the one end, unless Beltano did what I could not now persuade myself he would dream of doing—leave the island. If Brevia returned with a boat—and I plagued myself with a hundred disconcerting thoughts on his account—we could not make use of it. As I looked

forward to the terrible moment when our provisions would be exhausted and pictured the desperate plight we should be in, I saw nothing but death for me and ruin for Masita. We should probably attempt a last forlorn effort to avoid our gaolers and reach the boat, but—— There could be only one result. It was thus a very black and gloomy hour I passed as I waited for the rising of the moon.

I was roused from these very despondent meditations by the sound of Beltano's voice.

"I have trusted your word, Beppo, and am unarmed," he said.

"I shall keep it. What have you to say?"

"You have beaten me and I'm willing to come to terms."

He was too ready with this acknowledgment of defeat. I knew him better than to believe him sincere; but it could do no harm to listen to him. "What are they?" I asked.

"Who is with you in there?"

"Masita."

"What man, I mean."

"Only Giuseppe."

"Do you mean he is helping you?"

"He has shewn himself a better shot than you expected, eh? but never mind that, what are your terms?"

"You can go, and Masita; but no one else."

"How many men have you left? Unwounded, I mean?"

An oath slipped out. "You've taken care there shan't be many," he growled.

"Who came in that boat just now? How many?"

He was surprised that I knew of its arrival. "Two," he replied after a pause.

"That's the truth at any rate. You won't be surprised if I doubt you, after that trick you played me. How are

we to leave, if I accept your terms? What are you going to be doing, when we go? "

"What do you mean? " he asked in a surly tone.

"That you don't set a snare in sight of the game, Beltano. I don't trust you. If I were to go out now, it would probably be to walk into the hands of your men at the end of the path there waiting in readiness. Before I put my foot out of here, you must leave the island; and it must be in the broad daylight."

"Have I ever broken a pledge to you? "

"You never had so strong a motive before. But I'm through with the talking. You can't get me out of here and you can't get in to me. Come back in the morning and repeat your offer and agree to my conditions. And now go."

"But I declare——"

"Go," I called sternly; and not liking my change of tone, he went. We passed an anxious night; but there was no renewal of active operations. I kept watch until close to the dawn, and then lay down while the other two watched. Matters were so quiet that I feared Beltano had decided to try and starve us out. About noon Luigi came to ask if I would speak with Beltano, and I agreed.

He repeated his offer of the preceding night, but declined my condition—that he should leave the island first. I decided therefore to play my last card, and told him that I held Molta as a hostage; adding a pithy threat of what would happen to her if he drove me to extremes.

"You can't get in here, Beltano; if you had ten times the number of men you have, you couldn't; and if you did, you know now what the result would be."

The news disconcerted him entirely; and after a while he expressed himself ready to do what I required. He de-

clared he had only four men unhurt, and said that he and two of them would leave the island and remain away until the following day.

"I'll watch you start, and as I don't want to find you waiting for us when we land on the other side, you can head your boat away to the south there," I replied.

"I shan't play you false in this, Beppo," he declared. "But if we ever meet again, there'll be another story to tell."

I was still suspicious. It was so unlike him to yield a single point to which he had set his mind to gain, that this unconditional compliance appeared unnatural, even in spite of the fact that I had defeated him and had threatened Molta's life.

But I told Masita the news and set about the preparations for leaving. I resolved to adopt the same ruse as before in regard to Pepita—to bind her, hand and foot, and lock her into one of the rooms, that she should not appear to have helped us.

I was explaining this to her, when Masita called me suddenly to the narrow windows at the front and to my infinite surprise I found Agapa in the path.

"I have come to warn you, Beppo. Don't trust Beltano. He is not going away himself. He is mad about Molta, and he is sending across to the Count for him to send twenty or thirty men. The boat that came yesterday brought an urgent summons from him that Beltano should cross at once."

And without waiting for me to reply, she turned and fled back.

Masita looked at me in silence at this unexpected and most disastrous news; and then laid her hand gently on my arm. "Do you believe her, Beppo?"

"Yes, it fits Beltano too well. I thought there was devil-



ment intended. But at first, we'll appear to fall into the trap. We'll go and watch the start of the boat," and we went together up to the lookout.

I was surprised to find a fairly strong wind had risen since I had been last on the lookout at noon, and that, as it blew from the mainland with every appearance of freshening, it would take a boat at least two hours to make the crossing.

This meant that the help for which he was sending would not arrive that night. The messenger would have to find the Count, the latter would then have to get the men together; and, however quickly the thing was done, some hours would be required.

Beltano made every appearance of keeping his word. He took pains to shew himself plainly. I could not see the landing stage itself, but he stood at the top of the path leading down to it as if giving orders before his departure, and I had thus an opportunity of ascertaining how many men there were.

I counted five besides himself as they filed down the path, one of them having his arm in a sling.

As the boat passed out of the little cove, I could see three men on board, one of whom kept his head and shoulders concealed by the sail; and presently three returned up the path.

"He has gone," said Masita excitedly. She had also been counting. "There were only six, including Beltano; and three were in the boat and the others have just come up the path."

I shook my head dubiously. "If he had been there, he would have taken the tiller and shewn himself plainly. He had a man concealed by the landing stage to fool us. But it won't matter. He has only two sound men left with him, and they won't be enough."

"Enough for what?" she asked quickly. "You have a fresh plan?"

"Yes. I mean to escape to-night. He has laid a trap and he shall catch himself in it."

"You think it possible?" she cried, her eyes bright with excitement.

"I think it's our only chance. We must make it possible."

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR

As there would be some four hours of daylight and we could not attempt to get away until dark, I urged Masita to lie down and rest while I thought over the difficulties to be overcome in making our escape.

One chief cause of concern was in regard to the boat. I knew that there was one at the landing stage; but did not know whether it was ready for sea. When we reached it—if we did reach it at all—even seconds might be of vital importance. It was almost certain we should be pursued, and if at the last moment I had to hunt about for sailing gear, it might make all the difference between escape and recapture; in other words, between life and death.

I saw that I must have help outside, therefore; and there was but one person to whom I could look for this—Agapa; and only one means of communicating with her—through Pepita.

I wished her to be out of the fort before we left it, as it would be much safer for her than to be found there by Beltano, and there was now a chance of her getting away unseen. As Beltano would be reckoning upon our falling into the trap he had laid, he would not come near us and would also keep the men away until he found his scheme had failed.

I explained the position to Pepita, who readily consented to do all I need. "I myself will make sure that no one is near the mouth of the path here," I told her; "and then you can get by a roundabout way to the huts. You must tell Agapa that we mean to go to-night; and you and she

must contrive to have the boat ready for us to leave the instant we can get to it. When you have done that you can manage to hide either in one of the huts or in the farmstead; as it is not in the least likely that Beltano has even missed you."

Having made sure from the windows overlooking the path that no one was in sight, I went down and opened the big door and, with my revolver in readiness against a surprise, walked to the end of the path. It was all clear and I beckoned Pepita and waited until she was out of sight.

On my return I went up to the lookout. Beltano had given his orders cunningly. The boat was standing right away to the south; but at the same time so shaping her course that she could reach the mainland as soon as she went about.

But I cared nothing for that. By the time she could get back with the help Beltano had sent for, the issue between us would be decided one way or the other. The moon would rise about an hour later than on the previous night; and thus there would be about two hours of comparative darkness. That would be ample for my purposes.

One question gave me long and earnest consideration. What would Beltano do when he found that we did not leave? I came to the conclusion that he would set a watch, close to the building, or keep it himself. If he did, I should have to silence that sentinel before he could give the alarm and bring up the rest of the men.

There was another hazard to guard against if we got away from the island. The usual landing place was likely to be dangerous, as some of the men for whom Beltano was sending might be there to intercept us. I decided, therefore, to lay a course well to the north, round Cape Saint Vito, and then make for Cinisi, where there was a railway.

This would necessitate our being a much longer time at sea; and I told Masita, when I roused her at twilight, to make such preparations as she could for this, and to take with her something in the way of provisions.

When all was in readiness we went down to the door. "I am going first alone," I said. "I expect to find a man posted at the end of the path and I must deal with him before we can start. When I have done that, I will come back for you. Don't go out until I come."

"Let me go with you now," she urged.

"I would if possible; but you would almost certainly be seen, and my danger would be a hundred times greater." I knew that if I put it in that way she would give in.

It was now quite dark enough for my purpose, and I opened the door as noiselessly as possible and slipped out. A drizzling rain was falling and the wind was blowing hard. The sough of it in the olive trees close by was loud enough to drown any sound I might make. But I meant to take no risks; so I threw myself full length on the rocky path and worked my way to the mouth with the silent sleuth of an Indian.

The path down from the door was as steep as it was winding; but I knew every inch of it and glided along to the intervening slice of rock behind which I expected to find the man on watch. There I doubled my caution, moving with the utmost care and at a mere snail's pace. The dislodgment of even a single stone might spoil everything; and I felt every foot of the way in front of me before I slid forward.

Then I stopped and my heart quickened. The faint scent of tobacco was carried in my direction by the wind.

I had guessed rightly. Someone was on sentinel duty.

Inch by inch I edged my way forward with my head close

to the ground until I could peer round the ledge of rock; and then instantly drew back, as I saw the man. Not more than a yard or two separated us.

He was standing pressed close to the rock for shelter against the rain, his back to the wind and his face toward me. Short as the distance was between us, the fact that his face was turned in my direction would enable him to see me before I could close with him; and this would give him time to raise an alarm.

I was disconcerted by this for a moment; but then groped about until I found a fairly large stone. I rose and threw the stone so that it would fall in some bushes on the other side of him; and the instant I heard the shuffle of his feet as he turned in the direction of the sound it made, I whipped round the ledge and sprang on him and dragged him backwards. He was caught entirely by surprise and my hand was on his throat before he could utter a sound.

In the suddenness of the attack his musket fell and a short struggle followed in which he tried to get at his knife. I was much the stronger of the two, however, and he would have had no chance against me even if I had not been fighting for my life. I dashed his head against the rock until he lost consciousness and lay like a helpless log in my grip; and then I dragged him into the bushes close by, and taking off the long cloak he wore, left him to recover his senses.

Just as I regained the path I heard footsteps. I threw the cloak over my shoulders, pulled my hat down over my face, picked up his musket and stood back against the rock as if on guard.

With a start I recognised Beltano; and to my dismay Agapa was with him. I knew that, although she had been only too ready to help me in getting Masita away, she

would take his side in any struggle between us in which his life was in danger. Had he come alone, I would have welcomed a chance of fighting him and settling the quarrel there and then. But with her on the spot, such a thing would not only be dangerous but useless. She would raise the alarm instantly; and I cursed the mischance which had brought her with him.

I was at a loss what to do. I thought first of hurrying back to the building; but the absence of the guard would rouse suspicion; a search would be made and the man found, with the result that our chance of escape would run down to zero.

While I was hesitating in this perplexity, the opportunity passed, and the two saw me. My fear was that they had been attracted to the place by the sound of the struggle with the sentinel; and I knew that if Beltano questioned me, my voice would betray my identity.

I was wrong however. They had not heard anything; and I soon found that a very different purpose had brought them together.

"Any sign of Beppo, Juan?" asked Beltano as they came up.

"No," I growled indistinctly, drawing my cloak about my shoulders as if I were very sick of the watch.

He noticed the gesture and laughed. "You needn't growl about a little wet, Juan. A few minutes will finish this infernal business. We'll have him out in a minute or two at most. Now, Agapa."

And then the truth came out. Agapa had won over Beltano, or he had fooled her to believe as much; and she had come to betray me into his hands.

"Repeat your oath before Juan," she said, "You said you would."

"You needn't doubt me," he replied, and then turned toward me. "Agapa has been in league with Beppo, Juan, and warned him to-day that I had not left the island, and she has promised to have the boat ready for him to escape to-night. That is why he made no attempt to leave before when we were prepared for him. She is going now to tell him that everything's ready and bring him out. In return for her help now, I have sworn to make her my wife. The others know this."

"I am satisfied," said Agapa, and immediately started toward the building. "We shall have him now; he can't escape," said Beltano to me in a low voice. "Pedro, Ahmet, and Drako will be up in a minute. Ahmet will seize the signorina; and we four, Beppo. If he gives too much trouble thrust a knife into him, the treacherous dog!" he added with a vicious oath.

It was an ugly mess in all truth; and the worst of the thing was that even if we reached the landing stage, there would after all be no boat ready for us. What a fool I had been to trust to the Greek! Again the thought came to me to rush back to the building and face the risk of remaining there and holding out as long as possible even against the help for which Beltano had sent.

Masita would be waiting at the door; might even have it open; in which case Agapa would get in and have Masita in her power.

"Why the devil don't you speak, Juan?" growled Beltano, irritated at my silence or suspicious of it, and coming up close to me.

Then we heard Agapa's voice calling to me:

"Beppo! Beppo!"

Beltano held up his hand, signalling to me to be silent while we waited for the reply to her call.



And in the silence, as if the matter were not bad enough already, the injured man in the brushwood groaned.

"What's that?" said Beltano under his breath, as he turned his head quickly in the direction of the sound.

I saw my chance and took it. Clubbing my musket, I brought it down with crashing force on his head. He fell like a stunned ox; and, having made sure that he was senseless, I darted up the path and met Agapa, who had heard the blow and came rushing down to learn the reason.

It was ugly work to have to raise my hands against a woman; but there was no alternative. If we were to escape she must be silenced; so I caught hold of her, and clapping my hand to her mouth, dragged her back to the fort.

Masita was waiting, and had the door wide open in the belief that Agapa had been sent by me. "Quick, Masita," I exclaimed, using her name in my excitement. "Take the key out and put it in the outer side."

I kept my grip of Agapa while this was done, and then pushing her away into the building, closed and locked the door and threw the key away.

"She had betrayed us," I explained to Masita as we ran down the path. "She brought Beltano here and was to lure us out while he and the rest waited for us at the turn of the path. But I knocked him on the head; and he won't give us any more trouble."

At that moment Agapa began to scream violently. She had run up to one of the windows and was yelling at the top of her voice to alarm the rest of the men; and soon I heard them running toward us at full speed.

I drew Masita back into the shelter of some bushes and there we crouched until they had passed, and then made for the landing stage at full speed.

There wasn't a second to lose. The moment they dis-

covered Beltano and heard from Agapa what had occurred they would rush down to the boats to stop us; and I urged Masita forward and at last took her hand and half dragged her on.

At the top of the path leading down to the boat I stopped and sent her forward. I gave her my knife to cut the rope holding it to the stage, and told her to call to me if the oars were in it. Start without them, we could not, of course; and if they were not there, I must get them somehow, if I had to shoot every man on the island first. And the spot where I stood would give me a greater advantage in a fight than any other.

My heart beat fast as I waited for her voice.

"There is nothing in the boat," she called; and even as she spoke I heard the sounds of our pursuers.

I crouched out of sight and waited. Get away I would, at any cost. I swore that to myself; and I took out my revolver, resolved to shoot the first man who shewed himself clearly enough to make my aim certain. They were seeking my life, and to defend that I would take theirs without scruple.

Then another sound reached me from the direction of the farmstead. Others were evidently coming from there to take a hand in the matter; and I kept shifting my eyes from one direction to the other, searching the darkness for the first sign of our pursuers. I was at bay and as utterly reckless in reality now as ever Beppo Serrano had been believed to be.

The first comer was from the farmstead, and as I caught sight of his figure through the gloom, I raised my weapon to take careful aim.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### THE STORM

As I stood with my weapon levelled, peering through the gloom to get a clear view of the man stealing toward me from the direction of the farmstead, a light touch fell on my arm and I turned to find Masita at my side. Puzzled by the delay, she had crept up, her footsteps unheard in the racket of the wind.

I pointed silently in the direction of the figure. Her eyes were quicker than mine, and after a rapid glance she put her lips close to my ear and said hurriedly: "A woman;" at the same time stretching out her hand to my revolver.

She was right; and a couple of seconds later I recognised Pepita. Her slow approach was explained by the fact that she was struggling under the weight of a heavy burden which she was half carrying, half dragging.

I ran forward and found her load consisted of a pair of oars and a mast.

"Thank the Virgin you are here, Beppo," she cried, as I took them from her. "I have a sail too. I'll fetch it," and without more delay she darted back.

I carried them to the boat, and then ran back to await the coming of the men. But there was no sign of their approach and now no sound from their direction. I guessed, therefore, that the noise I had mistaken for the sound of pursuit had been caused by their discovery of our escape. Finding Beltano wounded, they were none too eager to face

the risks of a pursuit, until at last he should have recovered and be able to lead it.

Pepita was soon back with the sail, and as I took it and hurried down again to the boat, she told me she had overheard Agapa's treachery and, in the hope that I should escape, had brought the gear.

"You will come with us, Pepita?" said Masita eagerly.

But she drew back. "No, signorina, I shall wait for Breva's return," she replied. "I could not go."

"But if they find out what you have done," I urged, "you——"

"They will not find out," she broke in quickly. "Agapa locked me in my room and I can get back without her knowing I have left it."

"Come with us, Pepita, and I will see that you are safe and Breva too, and will provide for you both for life," urged Masita.

"You must come, Pepita," I said earnestly.

At that moment we heard afresh the sounds from the direction of the fortress hut. "Go, Beppo, go," cried Pepita.

"Not without you after this," I declared.

She put an effective end to the discussion; for without a word she turned and ran up the path like a deer and disappeared in the gloom. I started to follow her; but again the warning sounds of pursuit broke out. They were nearer this time; and as I still stood hesitating, a loud shout in Beltano's voice told me that he had recovered and was leading the men to the boats.

There was nothing for it, therefore, but to trust to Pepita saving herself by her own wits, and, jumping into the boat, I pushed off and pulled out to the mouth of the

cove with all my strength in the teeth of the stiff head-wind.

We were only just in time. Had I hesitated a minute longer we should not have escaped without a fight and bloodshed. I had not reached the mouth when the men came running down the path; and half a dozen shots were fired after us. None of the bullets touched the boat, however; and a couple of minutes later we were out of the little bay, and with an intervening bluff between us, we were safe from pursuit as well as from the risk of a chance shot.

I headed the boat slightly off the wind to the north, and rowed on until I had put a considerable distance between us and the island, when I shipped the oars in order to set the sail.

The rain had ceased, but the wind had increased; and it was beyond my strength to pull the boat to the mainland in the teeth of such a sea as was fast rising.

Then I made a very disconcerting discovery. Pepita's knowledge of sailing gear bore no sort of proportion to her plucky desire to help us; and in her hurry and confusion, she had brought a spar which did not belong to the boat, and an old sailcloth which was of little or no use.

"What is the matter?" asked Masita, hearing my exclamation of disappointment.

"Only that we shall be longer in making the crossing than I hoped. Pepita has brought the wrong sailing gear and we shall have to row across," and I started pulling again.

"Is it serious?"

"Serious on account of the delay; but it has one consolation—Beltano will never find out that she helped us."

It was not likely to be really serious unless the weather worsened; and I tried to hope that this would not prove to be the case. But the hope was short-lived. The moon rose soon after I had again taken to the oars, and to some extent relieved the pitchy darkness in which we had set out. But she was speedily hidden behind the masses of black driving cloud; and in the intermittent glimpses of light before she was finally obscured, I saw that for all my efforts the boat was making little or no progress.

Meanwhile the wind increased and blew with fierce rushing squalls which whipped the spray from the waves and sent it hissing over us. For some three hours or more I stuck doggedly at the oars until a fiercer squall than any before caught us just as the head of the boat was a little off the wind, swept us round broadside and would have capsized us had the boat been less stoutly built.

I got her head to the wind again and considered what to do. It was hopeless to think of crossing until the wind abated, and as it shewed every sign of increasing, I realised that we must make up our minds for a night at sea.

I told Masita; and her answer was characteristic.

"Better at sea than on the island," she said cheerily. "I am not afraid." I kept at the oars therefore; but as I felt that I must husband my strength to the utmost, I concentrated my attention more upon keeping the boat's head to the wind than upon making progress. Even this became almost impossible after a time, as the wind heightened and the gusts swept over us with increasing fury. And then disaster came.

One of the heavy oars was caught by a squall and wrenched out of my hand.

Masita gave a little cry of dismay, but rallied instantly. "Only surprise, not fear," she said quickly, forcing a

laugh, lest the quiver in her voice should betray her alarm and add to my discomfiture.

I did what I could with the one oar to keep the boat to the wind; but the next squall broached us round again, and once more we were in peril of being capsized. But the squall passed; and as if contented with the disaster it had wrought, the wind eased and a lull followed.

I saw that I must get some sort of sail set and, to divert Masita's thoughts from our danger, I asked her to help me. As the boat wallowed and rocked in the trough of the sea, I ripped off with my knife so much of the sail as I dared to set, and, wrapping the rest about the oar, I tied one end of the rope round it, and making the other fast in the bow, threw the sail overboard, to act as a drag anchor and keep the boat to the wind.

Then I set to work to step the spar as a sort of jury mast, lashing it as securely as I could to carry the three-cornered rag of a sail I had made, and I was fastening the ropes to this, when another squall struck us, fiercer, wilder, and longer than the worst we had had. But we weathered it successfully, for the drag anchor served its purpose well and kept us head on throughout it.

I judged that we could ride out the storm with its help, and had I been certain of our position, I would have trusted to it alone. But I knew that the tide was now setting strongly to the south; and feared that we should be carried back to the island to be dashed to pieces on its rocky coast. I dared not run that risk, and decided to set the sail and run before the wind until we had passed the northern shore of the island.

Taking advantage of the lull, therefore, I drew in the drag anchor, hoisted the rag of a sail, and crept aft and took the tiller from Masita, waiting for the next squall

with dire foreboding in my heart lest sail and mast and gear would all be blown clean out of the boat.

We ran steadily enough at first, but I held my breath as I heard the squall come hissing up astern. The boat leapt forward as it struck us and we flew through the water at racing speed. The spar bent and creaked under the strain, but it held; and I drew a deep breath of relief as the squall passed and we were still safe.

In order to clear the island I pointed a course as northerly as I dared in such a wind, easing off and running straight before it, whenever a squall struck us. At first, I strained my ears for the sounds of breakers on the shore; but when an hour or more passed, I knew that that danger was over, and that we were heading straight for the open sea.

Not wishing to be carried too far out, I had recourse to the drag anchor again. I lowered the sail and threw the oar overboard as before; and in this way we drifted, weathering successfully squall after squall of increasing violence.

All the time Masita had shewn undaunted courage. She was very quiet, speaking only at rare intervals, and then only to murmur some word of confidence, encouragement, or hope. I was hopeful also now. The storm had sprung up so quickly that the sea was not dangerously high; and I began to be confident that the boat would ride out the gale.

But the confidence was misplaced. The rope which held the drag anchor was frayed by the pitching of the boat and in the final gust of a heavy squall it parted, the boat slewed round with her broadside to the waves, and we were again in peril of being capsized.

I rigged up the rag of sail again; and let the boat run



before the gale, which had now reached its height. The slender spar bent ominously under the strain, but held for some hours, during which we covered many miles. Then it snapped in two, and our last hope was gone.

I made one final effort. To reset the sail was impossible; so I wrapped it round the broken spar, and by knotting the ropes together fashioned such a length of cable as was possible and cast it overboard, as I had done with the other crude drag anchor, to keep the head of the boat to the wind.

It helped us a little and with this perilously slender safeguard we drifted in constant danger of being swamped or capsized. Time after time I baled out the water, waiting in the intervals of the work either for the end of the storm or of our lives, whichever was fated to come first.

In that hour of despairing suspense the dawn broke; and as the light slowly strengthened over the tossing waters, it heightened the terror of the wild scene.

Masita had been lying on the bottom of the boat. She had borne the exposure and hardships of the terrible night magnificently. Not a word or murmur of complaint had passed her lips; never once had she given way; and not a sign had she shewn of the searching conflict of doubts and fears which I knew must have rent her mind in the darkness.

But when the light came and she had her first glimpse of the raging, tossing sea, she could not wholly restrain her feelings. A little cry escaped her lips, and with a shudder she shrank closer to me. It was only for a fleeting instant, however. The next second her face, pallid, drawn, and haggard with the terrible experiences of the night, was calm and unmoved, and she glanced up to make sure I had not seen her disquiet and been affected by it.

"We are in great peril?" she asked presently.

"I wish with all my heart I could say we were not," I replied with a sigh.

"You think there is no hope?"

"There is always hope."

She sighed. "And you have striven so hard," she said desolately.

After a little while she laid her hand on mine. "You have given your life for me," she said gently.

"I have striven for myself as much as for you, signorina."

As I used the word I felt her hand start. "Not that—now," she murmured; and withdrawing her hand from where it lay on mine, she slipped it under my palm.

It was almost as cold as death, and I pressed and chafed it in the effort to set the blood flowing again in the chilled veins. She smiled at this.

"You are very brave," I said.

"I am not afraid to die; only—only sorry." No more than a whisper this. And after a pause she glanced up again into my face. "And you?"

"I am not so resigned as you." The love of life was too strong in me, and my heart was in hot rebellion against the fate which threatened us.

She sighed again and was silent for a while. "There is nothing more we can do?" she asked presently.

"Nothing. We can only wait—and hope."

"Hope?" she echoed. "Hope for what?"

"That the storm may cease and we may be saved."

"And after?" The question was asked impulsively, and with a quick movement she looked almost eagerly into my eyes.

I did not understand. "We must wait to see if there is to be any afterwards," I replied dismally.

"I am not sure that I hope." The words were spoken rather to herself than to me; and presently she rose to her knees and, stretching out her other hand, clasped mine in both of hers, regarding me with the same steady look. "You have forgiven me?" she asked.

"What should I forgive?"

"That after all I have thus kept my vow and brought you to—your death."

"Masita!" I cried, wrought by her look.

"Oh, but I have wronged you so. In the night when death was so near I thought of that wild vow of mine. It was like a foretaste of hell itself! I vowed to cause your death and now——"

"For God's sake!" I broke in. I lifted her hands and held them close, and her fingers tightened in answer to the pressure of mine.

For some moments we stayed thus, gazing each into the other's eyes.

"You do forgive me?" she murmured.

"You love me, Masita?"

With a smile and a long-drawn sigh she yielded herself to me and I drew her to my heart and pressed my lips to hers.

"You know now why I do not fear to die," she said, as she let her head sink on my breast. "I only feared that if we were saved we should be parted."

I held her close-pressed to my heart, heedless now even of the grim perils that encompassed us, regardless of the raging sea and furious storm, absorbed by the consciousness that my burning love for her was returned. Love had stripped death of its terrors, and all the fury of the storm could not rob me of the intoxicating delight of that victory. We should die together. And at the thought, I strained

her yet closer to me, as if defying even the elements to part us.

We remained thus locked in our first love embrace, waiting for the end, too wrapt in this newborn delirium to heed aught that passed around us. And when at length I dragged my thoughts away and looked about us, I uttered a cry of fervent joy.

Masita looked up hurriedly.

"See," I cried, pointing to windward where the sky was brightening.

She followed my gaze, her face strained and pent. "You think there is hope?"

"I am sure. The wind is falling fast, and in less than an hour it will have died away. We shall be saved."

Her eyes clouded with doubt, and turning slowly she repeated her former strange question. "And after?"

I understood it now well enough and smiled. "We shall live—for each other, dearest," I whispered joyfully, as I drew her again into my arms.

The wind dropped rapidly, the waves ceased to break, giving place to a rolling swell; and we were soon out of immediate peril. But our plight was still serious. We were adrift on the open sea and helpless. Presently Masita spoke of it.

"There is no land in sight," she said.

"The storm has carried us far out to sea; but as soon as it is a little calmer I'll get that rag of sail on board and make shift to set it somehow," I said, speaking much more confidently than I felt. We must have travelled many miles in the storm; and the chance of getting the boat back to the land by such means was very slight.

I had another hope, however. I judged that we had been carried out far enough to be now in the track of

vessels; and an hour or two later the hope was confirmed.

"Is that the land?" asked Masita, pointing away to a dark line in the south.

"It is the smoke of a steamer," I cried; and hand in hand we sat and watched as the smoke thickened and then the form of a big vessel loomed into sight, steaming in a direction which would bring her within a mile of where we lay.

With feverish haste I hauled the drag anchor on board that the dying wind might drift us down toward her; and when she neared us, I ripped off part of the sail and waved it on the end of the stump of a spar to attract attention.

For a few minutes of sickening suspense, no heed was paid to the signal; and I shouted and holloed at the top of my lungs with the frenzy of a madman.

She was a big ocean liner, carrying the mails probably, and I knew that she would not stop to pick us up unless convinced that it was a case of urgent need.

"They have seen us," said Masita. "There is a man looking at us through a telescope."

I held up the broken pieces of the spar and the torn remnant of the sail that he should see our desperate plight.

"Thank God!" I exclaimed as the great liner altered her course and slowed down.

Then a boat was lowered and pulled rapidly in our direction; and the rush of relief was almost overpowering. Masita sank down on the thwart, trembling and tearful, and on the verge of collapse, far more agitated than she had been in the face of death. And I sat by her side and held her hand.

"All life is before us together, sweetheart," I said. The pressure of her fingers answered me first; then a trembling

sigh of happiness, followed by a laugh, half hysterical, as she rallied and answered:

"And I do not even know your right name."

"I am Cuthbert Dalrymple, an American."

She tried to pronounce my given name; but stumbled over the "th," and gave it up, laughing again. I would have taken her in my arms then to teach her to speak it; but the boat was now too close, and many eyes were scanning us curiously. So I reserved the lesson for a more fitting opportunity. There would be plenty of them, thank Heaven.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE END

THE steamer was the Star liner *Meronic*, on a pleasure cruise from New York to the Mediterranean, and now on her way to Naples from Alexandria, and as we went up the gangway a whole crowd of trippers welcomed us with staring eyes, gaping mouths, and a babel of wonderment and commiseration.

Among the voices I heard one which I recognised. No one having once heard it could mistake the stentorian voice of Senator Farnworth; and I had heard it often, for he was my father's lawyer and close friend. As I passed I looked straight into his face; but although he returned the stare, he did not know me.

My, but it was good to see a friend once again.

The captain questioned me, and I told him that we had been blown out to sea during the gale of the previous night and wished to go to Naples.

He ran his eyes over my queer dress suspiciously. "You speak like a New Yorker," he said.

"Not altogether unnatural, captain. I am one. My name is Cuthbert Dalrymple."

"What's that he says?" broke in the loud tone of John Farnworth, as the senator pushed through to the captain's side.

"You should know 'Sugar' Dalrymple's son, senator," I said with a smile. This was how my father was known among his business cronies.

He stared at me in amazement, and I saw the light of recognition leap suddenly into his eyes. "Gee wiz, it is the boy; but how in thunder did you get into that rig?" he cried. "Say, you fellows, this is Seth B. Dalrymple's boy alive and well. And who's the young lady?" he added excitedly as he clutched hold of me.

"This lady is Signorina Correggio, and sorely in need of both food and rest. Will you see to that, captain?"

"My wife'll fix that all right," said the senator. "I guess the lady won't want to be bothered with a heap of questions either," and to the mortification of the other ladies, who were athirst with curiosity, we four went off to his stateroom, where I left Masita in Mrs. Farnworth's care.

"And now tell me where in thunder you've been at all this devil of a time. Do you know that Pinkertons are spreading themselves all over Europe, to say nothing of the U. S., and Japan, and a few other little places, to find you?"

"It's a queer story and a long one, and I'm too used up to tell it just now. I'm as hungry as a runaway nigger and nearly as black as one."

"We'll fix that right now," he replied; and he did. A bath, a hearty meal, and a sleep of some hours made a new man of me. He sent a steward to me with a decent suit of clothes and clean linen; and I went on deck in the afternoon and over a cigar I told him everything that had occurred since I had recovered my senses.

"Pinkertons were right, by gee," he exclaimed. "They said they'd find you in Italy," and then he told me his story.

A scoundrelly Italian, named Paulo Tancredi, a member of the formidable "Black Hand" gang, had been arrested in New York for murdering a compatriot and, in order to



be revenged on the men who had betrayed him, had confessed that he had joined with them to murder me that night in the Italian quarter. This had been done at the instigation of the "Black Hand" gang, whose enmity my father had incurred. I had been carried into a house, stripped of everything, clothed in some filthy garments belonging to one of the gang, and left for dead. When they returned for the purpose of getting rid of my body, they found me alive, but without the least knowledge of what had occurred or who I was. I was chattering Italian, and they had then led me to believe that I was one of themselves until a chance had come to ship me off to Italy in the company of a man who was believed to be in league with a lot of kindred scoundrels in southern Italy. This man had lost his life in a brawl on board ship; and from that point all clue to my whereabouts had been lost. The presumption was that he had some confederates on board and that one or other of them would know where to look for me; and it was this clue which Pinkertons were following up.

As Tancredi had only been arrested a few weeks before, there had not yet been time to find the other men. How I had come to join Beltano or how I had wandered down into Sicily, I never learnt; but what the senator told me made it an open guess that in some way the men I had been with in the steamer from New York had taken me there.

"And now what would you advise, senator?" I asked, when he had finished, and we were nearing Naples.

"Stay right where you are, boy. You're safe under the American flag. Stop under it; and leave me to do the rest. I'll send a cable to your pap; and I'd give a thousand dollars to see his face when he reads it. But you can't be at both ends of a wire, worse luck; so I must imagine it. You stop right here, anyway; and as for those fellows who've

been playing you for this, I'll give 'em hell." And as soon as he could get his big legs on shore, he was off.

It was all very well to say stop there under the protection of the flag; but—there was Masita.

It was certain that she would wish to return to her home, and equally certain that I should not let her go alone, however anxious I might be to keep away from the scene of my recent experiences.

But when the senator came back he brought news which put a different complexion on matters.

"I've made things hum at the Consulate and have news for you. Lively doings down at that little island of yours. Somebody gave it away that your friend, Signorina Correggio, was a prisoner on the island, and as the authorities wanted a decent excuse for paying a surprise visit there, they sent over a bunch of police this morning and arrested everybody they could lay hands on; and just now they're hunting high and low for the most dangerous rascal of the lot. You can guess who that is," he added, his eyes twinkling.

"Beltano of course."

"No, they pay that compliment to—Beppo Serrano," he said with a laugh. "You made yourself busy, it seems; and they want you for a couple of murders. That magistrate, Vicino, for one, and the signorina for the other. However, I've fixed that all right. I gave 'em that confession you had and handed on your suggestion about interrogating the prisoners separately; and by the time we reach New York they'll have straightened the thing out."

"But I may not be able to go."

"How's that?"

"If Signorina Correggio wishes to return home I shall go with her."

He whistled. "Oh, it's that way, is it? You must have it pretty badly, boy, to want to go and fool around down there at such a time. But you're old Seth B's son, and he was always as obstinate as a train of mules. Have you seen her then while I've been on shore?"

I told him I had not; and he bounced off to his wife to see if Masita could come to us. She was still sleeping, however, utterly worn out by the exposure and hardships of the previous night.

"We'll have to wait till the morning, anyhow," he said. "The ship stops here all day to-morrow, so you'll have plenty of time to make a young ass of yourself, if you decide to; and I suppose I should have done it myself at your age."

"Did you hear any news of her brother?" I asked.

"Not a jot. Don't seem to me he matters any." Matter or not, no news ever was heard of Julius. He had undoubtedly been drowned in the storm.

"There's another thing," I said. "There are two of the people on the island who must be taken care of. A lad, Breva, and a girl, Pepita. They saved my life."

"Breva? I heard that name. He's the fellow who told about the signorina being a prisoner. He'll be all right. The carabinieri, or police, or whatever they are, got hold of him and he said he had swum across to bring the news. There was the delay usual in this land of *dolce far niente* before they would believe him, and a bit more to get going; but they did things at last; and he'll be all right. I'll see about the girl in the morning."

"Signorina Correggio will be able to help in that."

"She seems a person of some account down there."

"She has big estates and great influence; and she is the best and noblest——"

"I know," he said drily, "they always are," and without more he got up and went away.

Next morning, as I was finishing dressing he rushed into my stateroom. "I've fixed things about that girl, Pepita. Put Pinkerton men on to it with instructions to bring her and the lad over to New York. Better get 'em out of a land which has nothing in it worth a cuss except the scenery, and give 'em a chance in God's country."

"That's exactly what I wished," I replied, thanking him.

"And now there's nothing left to fix except the signorina, and I'm going to her right now. She's up on deck. And she's a peach, sure."

"Here, hold on," I cried as he turned to hurry out. "I think that that's a thing I'd better——"

He interrupted me with a chuckle. "That's all right. Rather tackle her yourself. Only get a hustle on and don't let her talk you into going south. If they're looking for Beppo, let 'em look; mind that. And, say, tell her I used her name this morning about the other two and that she must make good."

I went on deck and found it nearly deserted, the passengers being ashore sight-seeing. Masita was walking alone. She turned as I uttered her name, and after a little start and a smile at the change in my appearance, she put her hands into mine.

"I was waiting for you; and so impatiently. I want to go."

"Where?"

"What a question! Why home, of course."

"Before we go——"

"We?" she broke in.

"We of course. You and I."

"But you must not go back."

"How will you stop me?"

"You must not go, of course," she repeated insistently.

"Well, let's talk it over. Have you heard the news yet?"

She shook her head. "Then I'll tell you;" and I repeated all that the senator had told me.

"There, you see you must not go," she cried.

"I shall make my will first. That's all."

"You make a jest of it. But you must not run such a risk."

"There's only one way of preventing me," I said, smiling.

She paused, her eyes asking the question she was reluctant to put in words. "I am anxious about my brother," she said, attempting a compromise.

"There's only one way of preventing me," I repeated. She understood, and let her eyes fall. "I want to tell you something," I added, and began to give her an account of myself when she stopped me.

"I know it all. Mrs. Farnworth told me," she said quickly.

"And is that why you wish to go home, then?"

We were leaning over the rail and she kept her eyes intently fixed on the blue water below, and after a pause turned them on me with a half-challenging look. "And if it is?"

I held them a moment and smiled. "Then I shall have to begin all over again in my own name this time," I replied.

She parried this with a laugh, sweet and low and musical. "But I must go home."

"They are hunting high and low for Beppo Serrano, and will clap him into prison the moment they catch sight of him."

Her face clouded. "I don't know what to do," she murmured.

Then I surprised her. "I agree that you ought to go home," I said. She turned quickly at my apparent inconsistency. "But for my safety you must let me choose the route," I added.

"You are laughing," she cried.

"Never more serious in my life," I declared gravely.

"Then what route? Tell me," and she clapped her hand down on the rail with a gesture I knew well.

I laid mine on it and captured it. "By way of New York. It shall be our——"

"Cuthbert!"

"Ah, you've learnt that all right. I'm glad."

The colour rushed into her cheeks and her eyes lighted. But after a moment she said earnestly. "There is Julius."

"Yes. And Beppo too, if we go there at once from here; but there'll be no Beppo, or at least no trouble for him, if we choose the New York route."

"But you don't understand. I have nothing at all with me."

"What's the matter with the New York stores, and as for the voyage, any old things will do."

She laughed again. "Are all Americans in such a hurry as you?"

"Senator Farnworth thinks I'm slow. But he's a hustler."

"A what?" she asked, laughing again.

I was explaining when he came up.

"Well, have you straightened things out?" he asked.

"Yes. Signorina Correggio is going with us to New York, we are to be married as soon as we land, and then coming back to look after her affairs here."

Masita uttered a little cry of astonished protest; but it was almost lost in my big friend's exclamation of satisfaction.

"Bully for you, my boy. And if you can spare her hand for a moment, I'd like to shake it and say I'm mighty pleased to hear the news."

In blushing confusion Masita drew her hand away and gave it to the senator. He grasped it warmly and bowed over it. "Miss Correggio, I'm just delighted. I said last night there was nothing in this country worth thirty cents except the scenery. I take that back freely now that I know you. And now I'll just tell my wife that she must fix things comfortably for you on the voyage;" and off he went.

Masita and I looked at one another. "He has taken my breath away," she said.

"If it comes to that, I'm worse than he is, for I'm taking all the rest of you away."

And so it proved.

THE END





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